

## Whitworth Church

Whitworth church, the dedication of which is unknown, stands c 9 km to the south-west of Durham, and 2 km north-west of Spennymoor, close to Whitworth Hall on the south-east side of the Wear valley.

### Description

The church consists of an aisleless nave with a south porch, and a chancel with a north vestry and organ chamber. There are a variety of fabric types; the south sides of nave and chancel are of squared and coursed roughly-pecked stone, but the west end of the nave is of thinly-coursed rubble (above a squared-stone plinth) and the north wall of thinly-coursed rubble for its full height; the east ends of both nave and chancel are rendered, as is the east wall of the vestry; the north wall of the vestry is of roughly-coursed squared stone. The dressings are either of tooled-and-margined stone (the nave buttresses and south doorway) or tooled sandstone ashlar, and the roofs are of graduated Lakeland slate. All the gables have copings that are chamfered on their lower edge. The architectural features of the building are all in a 13<sup>th</sup> century 'Early English' style.



The church from the south-east

The **Nave** has a single chamfered plinth on south and west, with a second similar one appearing at a lower level as the ground falls away on the north. There are paired stepped buttresses at the western angles, and at the east end of the side walls, with two smaller stepped buttresses on the south; the plinths of these buttresses are all set rather lower than that of the wall itself, suggesting that they are additions of 1850.

There is a hollow-chamfered oversailing course to the eaves. The west end has a two-light window of two lancet lights in a pointed arch, under a moulded hood with turned-back ends, and a supra-arch of roughly-shaped voussoirs. The gable above is carried on kneelers that are simply blocks chamfered on their overhanging lower angle, and rises to a gabled bellcote with a two-centred arch that has its outer order carried on jamb shafts with moulded caps and bases, and an expanded-arm cross as a finial. Set against the lower part of the wall are two shelters enclosing a pair of medieval effigies (see 'Sepulchral Monuments' section) with chamfered stone piers at their outer angles carrying pent Lakeland slate roofs.

The nave windows are simple lancets, in chamfered surrounds with moulded hoods that have turned back ends. There are three on the south, to the east of the porch, where the walls articulated into three bays by stepped buttresses. There are no buttresses on the north, where

the western of the four lancets is distinguished from the others by its darker more weathered dressings, indicating it as work of 1850 as opposed to the three eastern which date from 1883; all are clearly insertions in the 1803 wall. Possible traces of the sash windows of the 1803 building are seen in what seems to be a sill between the second and third lancets, and a ragged straight joint between the eastern two.

The east end of the nave is largely rendered; it has lost its gable finial.

The **Porch** is of squared stone, with stepped buttresses at the south end of each side wall. The steeply two-centred arch has a continuous chamfer to its inner order, and an outer order with two separate chamfers, carried on jamb shafts. All this looks recent restoration (indeed the whole porch may have been rebuilt in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century); the only 19th-century stonework is the deeply moulded hood with its foliate stops. Above the arch is a very decayed sundial of 18<sup>th</sup> century character; the gable is topped by a bracelet cross finial.

The south wall of the **Chancel** is of similar fabric to that of the nave; this is probably 1803 stonework re-used in 1850. There are paired stepped buttresses at the east end, and one midway along the south wall. There is also a moulded string at the level of the sills of the lancets, which is continued round the buttresses, and steps up c 0.60 m short of those at the eastern angles. The south wall has a single lancet in each bay and there is a stepped triplet in the east end, with linked hoodmoulds. The east wall, like that of the nave, is rendered; its coping is similar to that of the nave gables, and it is topped by a finial cross, its head now missing.

The north wall of the chancel is covered externally by the **Vestry/Organ Chamber**. On its east side this has a small lancet window of the usual type and, close to the north end of the wall, stone steps up to a shoulder-arched doorway. The head of this has a sunk panel with the incised date 'A.D.1930'; nevertheless the head looks older and more weathered than the jambs; might this be a piece of genuine medieval work re-used? There are buttresses at either end of the north wall of the vestry, which has another lancet near its east end. The west wall has two lancets, the southern differing from all the others in the church in having simple block terminals to its hoodmould.

## **The Interior**

The internal walls of the church are all plastered and whitewashed, except for the exposed dressings of the south door and chancel arch; the internal dressed stonework of the eastern triplet is painted green

The south doorway, now inside the south porch, has a simple two-centred arch with a continuous broad chamfer with neat stops at the base, and a hoodmould with turned back ends, chamfered below. Inside the main body of the church, the south doorway and all the windows have simple two-centred rear arches, all behind plaster. The chancel arch is of steep two-centred form and of two chamfered orders; the inner order is carried on circular shafts with moulded bases and capitals, with nail-head ornament in the capitals. The chamfer of the outer order is stopped at the impost, then resumed on the jamb below. The chamfered hoodmould has head stops, a king on the north and a bishop on the south. The triplet of lancets in the east wall have jamb shafts with moulded bases, rings and mid-height and capitals (again with nail head) carrying a moulded internal hoodmould with carved stops.



On the north side of the chancel is a broad segmental-headed arch to the vestry/organ chamber, with a continuous chamfer to head and jambs.

The roof of the nave is of five bays, with collar-beam trusses that have arched braces and spring from moulded ashlar corbels. The chancel roof is panelled and boarded, with painted decoration, with the Sacred Monogram within a wreath on the side slopes and a series of motifs along the horizontal section at the apex; it has a moulded and brattished wall plate with gilded flowers.

(left) Interior looking east

### **Fittings and furnishings**

The majority of the fittings and furnishings in the church date to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century

The benches in the nave and panelled dado, which has a brattished top rail are of 1890; the stone semi-octagonal pulpit, again in late medieval style, which is painted white, may be of c1850. The font, also painted, has an octagonal bowl with relief-carved foliate panels and pilasters at the angles, on a circular moulded base and shaft.

The chancel was refurbished in 1888; of this date are the choir stalls, communion rail and reredos; the painted ceiling and marble mosaic floor are both of 1892.

### **Sepulchral Monuments**

The oldest monuments at Whitworth are a pair of medieval effigies, both of sandstone and dated to c1290, a knight and a lady, that now lie under open shelters built in 1935 against the external face of the west wall of the nave. A second female effigy mentioned by Hutchinson (1794, 322) has long been lost.

The following descriptions of the effigies are taken from Hunter Blair (1929, 13/37); an earlier detailed description is given by Boyle (1892, 528-9)

The knight's effigy is virtually identical to one at Pittington. It has a closed cylindrical heaume, with a transverse eye slit, upon one pillow; hauberk (main not indicated) beneath a short sleeveless surcoat with narrow girdle, legs, crossed, in mail (?) with hard leather (cuir-bouilli) knee-cops, right crossed over left, feet in mail, plain spur leathers, prock spurs and feet resting on a prostrate human figure, with a little dog lying on the slab to the right of the legs. The sword has straight quillons, held upright in the right hand, with the point against the right side of the heaume and no belt. The shield is large and pointed, on the left arm covering the front of the body, without a strap, and bears two bars and a border charged with roundels (an unknown blazon).



The woman's effigy is badly weathered, details of the head, which rests on a single cushion, being entirely destroyed. The dress is apparently a kirtle with tight sleeves and a mantle above it; the hands have been clasped in prayer and the feet rest upon a crouching dog. The same arms as appear on the knight's shield are carved on the back of the head-rest.

(left) The knight's effigy

The earliest monument inside the church is a ledger stone, now laid north-south alongside the west wall of the nave, to Jane Wright, d.1678. On the wall above, there are mural tablets on either side of the west window. That to the north has an open pedimented top with a coat of arms, and a Latin inscription to Mark Shafto, d.1723. That to the south is a Gothic tablet to Robert Mc Farlane 1854, signed by W T Hale Sculptor, of Edgeware Road, London.

There are other mural tablets at the east end of the nave; to the north of the chancel arch is another marble tablet with an open pedimented top to Edward Abercrombie Wilkinson, vicar of Whitworth, d. 1900, by Lowes & Sons. At the east end of the south wall of the nave is a tablet to Robert Eden Duncomb Shafto, d 1818. In the floor at the north-east corner of the nave is a large and well-preserved black heraldic limestone ledger to Margaret, wife of Mark Shafto, d1715, reportedly covering the entrance to the Shafto family vault..

### **Historical Notes and Records of Structural Work**

Little documentary evidence survives of the earlier history of the church, which is believed to have been a chapel of ease to Kirk Merrington, and was traditionally founded by one of the early Lords of Whitworth.

Our only description of the pre-1803 church, which might have either been a medieval building or some post-medieval rebuild, is provided by the Durham historian Hiutchinson (1794, 322)

‘The chapel is a small and mean fabric, consisting only of a body and fabric of equal height in length, from east to west, forty feet, and in width seventeen feet and a half. In the church-yard are some ancient monuments.... (he goes on to describe the effigies of a knight and 2 females)

This older church would appear to have fallen into disrepair, and it was rebuilt in 1803 by James Deason (vicar 1796-1810)

Under the Rev. Charles Carr (appointed to Whitworth in 1848) the church was remodelled again; Fordyce (I, 585) writes:

‘(The church) was recently a small and very plain structure, rebuilt on the foundations of a

previous chapel about the year 1808, and consisting of a nave 40 feet in length, without ecclesiastical character. In 1850, it was closed for some months, during which extensive improvements and additions were made. The walls of the nave were lowered, and a high pitched open roof was substituted for the former flat and ceiled one. A chancel, 20 feet long, and a vestry were added; and the former sash windows were replaced by narrow lancets. The west window is filled with stained glass, and three graceful lancets form the east window. There is a bell turret at the west end, and a sun dial above the south porch. The entire cost of these improvements amounted to above £500'...

He goes on to note two rather than three effigies lying in the churchyard, and that they were 'protected by a wooden railing'; in a footnote he adds that 'Two old bells belonging to the church, and exactly similar, inscribed "R.Shafto, 1727" were recast into one bell at Mr Watson's establishment, High Bridge, Newcastle....it is inscribed "DEFUNCTOS PLORO VIVOS VOCO + ANNO1850"'.

Further improvements were carried out under the Rev Edward Abercrombie Wilkinson, appointed in 1883. These included the insertion of three additional lancet windows on the north of the nave, and the creation of an Organ Chamber out of part of the vestry, with a new arch being opened in the north wall of the chancel.

The earliest faculty to survive for the church is for a stained glass window in 1899. Subsequent one which have some bearing on the structural history of the building are:

Code (all with prefix DDR/EJ/FAC)	Date	Content
3/2279	3.4.1929	Stone porch over vault entrance in churchyard
3/2299	4.10.1929	A new vestry
3/7662b	20.1.1993	Stonework repairs
3/8296	21.8.1997	Repair and re-point bell cote

## Structural Development

Fordyce's account states that the 1803 church was built upon the foundations of its predecessor, which might have either been a medieval building or perhaps a post-medieval rebuilt. This seems to be borne out by the fact that the internal dimensions of the present nave correspond closely with those quoted by Hutchinson in 1794, but it seems unlikely that any pre-180s fabric survives above ground level. The second and lower-level plinth on the north might at first sight seem to indicate earlier work, but is probably simply a response to the falling ground level on that side of the building.

The 1803 building, 'without ecclesiastical character' was completely remodelled in 1850, with the addition of a chancel, vestry and probably the south porch; almost all the present architectural features are of this period, although the three eastern lancets on the north of the nave

(distinguished by their slightly less-weathered dressings) and the arch to the organ chamber are of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 'new vestry' recorded in the 1929 faculty (and in fact dated '1930') simply seems to have been a northern extension to the 19<sup>th</sup> century vestry and organ chamber although the head of its shoulder-arched external doorway looks like an older piece re-used.

## The Churchyard

The churchyard is of trapezoidal plan, set on the edge of a steep valley side dropping away to the north-east; the 1st edition Ordnance Survey 6":1 mile map of c1860 shows it as of the same extent as today. There are entrances at the south-west and south-east (to Whitworth Hall) corners. To the south of the church is a thin scatter of headstones, mostly of 19<sup>th</sup> century date; monuments in the northern part of the yard are mostly later. There are a few stones of local interest:



On the south of the chancel a table tomb to the Farrow family, with a dwarf wall and railings, now in poor condition. Close to the south-east angle of the nave, an interesting headstone to three sons of John Wilkinson of Old Park, d.1727, with an inscription on the east and three stylised low-relief figures on the west (left) A little to the south of the south porch are headstones to John Gordon, steward to the Shafto family, d1773 and his wife Mary d/1725

Lying along the foot of the south wall of the nave are other early 18<sup>th</sup> century headstones, and broken fragments of 19<sup>th</sup>-century headstone crosses.

In the north-west angle of the churchyard is an enclosure with a miniature mausoleum, without any inscription; this is presumably the structure referred to in the 1929 faculty.

## Archaeological Assessment

Whilst this is not a church of great archaeological significance, nevertheless it stands upon a medieval site, and it seems clear that the earlier chapel directly underlies the nave of the present building. Whilst any surviving structural remains will inevitably have been damaged both by generations of internment, and the usual 19<sup>th</sup>-century underfloor heating system, any works that entail disturbance of floor levels within the nave will require archaeological monitoring.

The principal tangible medieval relic at Whitworth comes in the form of the two effigies in the churchyard. It is a matter of current concern that their decaying condition is being exacerbated

by their exposure to the elements, despite the degree of protection conferred by their pent-roofed shelters set against the west end of the church. Despite their eroded condition these are monuments of some importance, being amongst the earliest effigies in the county. They were originally intended to lie inside the church, but have suffered centuries of exposure after being cast out of the building at some post-Reformation date. If their continued survival is to be assured, conservation measures should be discussed with an expert, and consideration ought to be given to the fact that, if they are assessed to be of sufficient importance, the only really effective solution will be to return them the building.

Peter F Ryder July 2005

### Sources

- Boyle, J.R. (1892) Comprehensive Guide to the County of Durham
- Fordyce, W (1857) The History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham.  
(2 volumes)
- Hunter Blair, C.H. (1929) Medieval Effigies in the County of Durham. Archaeologia Aeliana 4<sup>th</sup> ser. VI, 1-51
- Hutchinson, W (1794)History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham III, 248-249

Whitworth Heritage Trail (booklet available in church 2005, n.d.)

(From which much of the information in this report, particularly that relating to 19<sup>th</sup> century works, is taken)