

St Philip and St James, Witton le Wear

Witton le Wear parish church stands on rising ground on the north side of the village street, and is at first glance an attractive small church in the free Gothic popular at the end of the Victorian era. It consists of a nave with a western bellcote, south porch, and a shorter north aisle, and a chancel; with north organ chamber and vestry.

Description

The church is built of sneaked tooled stone with grey ashlar dressings that have a fine diagonal tooling. There is an chamfered plinth (except on the north), alternating quoins, gables coped with interlocking slabs, hollow-chamfered on their lower edge, with triangular panelled foot stones. The roofs are of red tiles, except for small blue (Scottish?) slates on the porch.

The west end of the **Nave** has a big central stepped buttress between a pair of windows, each of two trefoiled ogee lights with tracery over, under steeply two-centred arches with moulded hoods that have unusual spiral terminals. There is a steeply-chamfered string course below the bell cot, which has a pair of four-centred arches with chamfers to their heads, under a gabled cap topped by a plain cross. Most openings have hollow-chamfered surrounds.

The south wall of the nave has a big stepped buttress at each end, and the projecting south porch set a little to the west of centre. West of the porch is a three-light window and to the east a pair of two-light ones; all have uncusped four-centred lights with two-centred sub-lights above, under square heads and moulded hoods with turned back ends.

The north wall of the nave, above the boiler room, is capped by a stack with a gabled top set east-west, with a round-arched vent.

The **South Porch** has its chamfered plinth set at a higher level than that of the nave; there are stepped diagonal buttresses at the southern angles. The outer arch is of two-centred form; its inner order, carried on semi-octagonal responds with moulded caps and bases, has a swelled chamfer, and the outer, continuous to the ground, a hollow chamfer. The moulded hood has carved head stops, the western a bishop, the eastern a queen. In the gable above is a cusped square panel with the Sacred Monogram 'IHC' and the gable has a fleur-de-lys and finial cross.

The **North Aisle** only extends for the eastern two-thirds of the north side of the nave; to its west is the sunken boiler room. In the west wall of the aisle, above the boiler room roof, is a square-headed window with a cinquefoil-headed light and a hoodmould of the usual type. On the north of the aisle are three two-light windows, each of a pair of plain four-centred lights without hoodmoulds, of two trefoil-headed lights. The masonry in the lower part of this wall is rougher than that above and may survive from the medieval building; beneath the central window are possible traces of a blocked doorway.

The **Boiler Room** has a pent concrete roof; in its west end a flight of stone steps descends to a segmental-headed chamfered doorway; to the north of it is a square-headed window, also chamfered round.

The **Chancel** has a steeply-chamfered string course running below the windows. On the south are two square-headed windows, the western of three lights and the eastern of two; they have

trefoiled ogee-headed lights and square-headed sub-lights, under moulded hoods with turned-back ends. At the east end the string course steps up beneath the east window, set high in the wall, which has three cinquefoil-headed lights under a four-centred arch and a moulded hood with plain block terminals. Above is a square-headed loop in a chamfered surround, and the gable has a cross fleury terminal. The lowest quoin at the south-eastern angle has a splay-armed consecration cross set in a sunk circle.

On the north of the chancel the **Vestry** is set back slightly from the east end. Its east wall has a window of three four-centred lights with a segmental relieving arch over, and its north wall a shoulder-arched door; to the west is the taller **Organ Chamber** with its hip-ended roof with curving tiles on the ridges; its north end has a two-light square-headed window with a segmental relieving arch above.

The Interior

The interior of the **South Porch** has stone benches on either side; the porch encloses the original south door, retained from the medieval church. This is a plain square-headed opening without any chamfer or moulding, with some large and irregular large blocks in its jambs; the lintel (the extrados of which is cut to a shallow triangular form) has been renewed but the semicircular arch above is of old roughly-shaped voussoirs, although the tympanum it encloses looks to be of c1900 masonry. The door itself is ancient; its studded front face is made up of vertical boarding and the rear of horizontal boards; Hodgson (62) reports to bear the incised date '1664'.

The interior of the main body of the church is plastered, except for some exposed dressings. The windows generally have chamfers to their rear arches only, and horizontal sills with the front edge chamfered; their jambs are generally of exposed alternating ashlar blocks. The two in the west end have two-centred rear arches and those in the side walls of nave, chancel and aisle, all have segmental rear arches. The south door has a plain semicircular rear arch behind plaster. The north arcade is of three bays, with two-centred arches, each of two chamfered orders, carried on circular piers and semicircular responds with octagonal and semi-octagonal capitals (circular at the neck and with a big hollow moulding to the abacus) and rising from metre-high square plinths, with moulded 'holdwater' bases. The upper part of the eastern pier and both pier capitals have been renewed, as have all the bases except that of the western respond¹

The window at the west end of the **North Aisle** has a chamfered internal lintel; at the east end of the aisle is a four-centred arch into the Organ Chamber, of two chamfered orders, the inner dying into the jambs and the outer continuous.

The **Chancel** is entered up two steps and under the four-centred chancel arch, with a hollow-chamfered inner order carried on semi-octagonal responds with brattished capitals and moulded bases, and a broad outer order studded with foliate bosses, under a hoodmould with head stops, a king to the right and a bishop to the left. The whole arch is painted, with the bosses and capital decoration being gilt.

On the north of the chancel are the segmental-pointed arch to the Organ Chamber, and a four-centred moulded doorway to the Vestry, with elaborate bar stops to its jambs. The two

¹This has rather simpler convex mouldings rather than the full 'holdwater' type.

windows on the south have segmental rear arches, and at the east end of the wall is a credence table with a trefoiled ogee recess and a projecting semi-octagonal stone shelf. The sill of the east window is lowered to hold the reredos; its internal surround has a hollow chamfer.

Inside the Vestry the door to the chancel has a shallow segmental rear arch, and to the east of it is a recess (now containing a cupboard) with a similar head. The east window has a timber lintel carrying a broad chamfer with bar stops, and there are also segmental arches to the internal opening of the doorway at the west end of the north wall, and to a narrow doorway into the Organ Chamber at the north end of the west wall.

The nave has a boarded barrel roof of four bays, with king-post trusses that have long arch braces; there is ashlar to the eaves, and a moulded plate. The aisle has a three-bay roof with the principals carried on short wall posts, again with arch braces, that rest on moulded stone corbels; a simpler version of the same roof occurs over the vestry. The chancel has a boarded wagon roof with painted panels, the section over the sanctuary having gold stars and a foliate cross as a boss above the altar.

Fittings & Furnishings

The **Font**, at the west end of the nave, is octagonal with a series of attached shafts in a 12th-century style; it is of Frosterley marble, and probably of early 20th century date.

The furnishings of the church - simple but good quality **Benches** in nave and aisle, the **Pulpit** with its carved panels of linen-fold and foliage work, the **Reading Desk** and **Choir Stalls** with carved openwork panels, the **Organ Case** and the **Altar Rails**, mostly look to go with the rebuilding of 1899-1902. The **Screen** to the Organ at the east end of the north aisle is a good piece with cusped arches and gilt foliate bosses. The carved oak **Reredos** is of 1931.

The sanctuary has a floor of Minton tiles

In 1894 the Rev Hodgson claimed to have discovered the base of a 15th century pulpit beneath its 18th-century successor (which retained a sounding board), but there seems to be no record of what happened to it; there is also no sign of the old font, 'a rude piece of Norman work, in shape like a truncated cone' (Boyle 510)

The **Stained Glass** is not of especial note; the east window (Crucifixion) is of 1902; the south-east window of the chancel, of 1915, is an interesting pseudo-medieval conceit, one light shows the redoubtable Rev Hodgson kneeling at a prayer desk in front of the church, accompanied by St James, whilst the other his wife in front of the vicarage, along with a female saint bearing flowers. The south-west window of the chancel is a Transfiguration dated 1919; in the nave the south-eastern window is an Annunciation of 1904, and the next to the west SS Philip and James) of 1917. The windows of the north aisle show various Northern Saints. The Rev Hodgson is reputed to have designed several of the windows.

On the north wall of the chancel is a bracket carrying an 17th century funeral helmet, technically an armorial sallet; this is a replica of an original on loan to the Royal Armouries (Tower of London).

On the wall of the south porch to the west of the south door is an old **Board**, its painted inscription now rather faint, stating that the Incorporated Church Building Society granted £50

in 1901 towards the rebuilding of the church.

Monuments

The earliest monuments are three medieval cross slabs now built into the internal walls of the south porch; they are described in detail and illustrated by Ryder (1985, 120-121, plate 55):

- (1) A small double slab - something of a rarity - at the south end of the east wall, perhaps of late 13th or 14th century date. Left cross with stylised oak leaves in head and sword on l. of shaft, r. cross with bracelet head, stylised oak leaves springing saltire-fashion from shaft and pair of shears.
- (1) An intact slab at the north end of the east wall, perhaps of 12th century date. Simple straight-arm cross with head in a sunk ring, rising from triangular base, with sword on r. of shaft.
- (1) The upper part of a slab of later 13th century date; bracelet-derivative cross with clustered terminals, with pair of shears on l. of shaft,

At the west end of the south wall of the nave is a mural tablet to Rev John Farrer, d1808, with a shrouded urn and pastoral crook, signed by J Bacon jnr of London. On the north of the sanctuary is a Gothick tablet to Rev George Newby 'master of Witton School' d1846, signed by W.D. Keyworth of Hull, and on the south side a simpler one to Elizabeth James wife of George Hutton Wilkinson of Harperley Park, d1842

On the chancel floor, immediately to the east of the northern choir stalls is a thin blue limestone slab inscribed 'Here lies Thomas son of the adjacent John Hodshon he died 1723... The lower half of the slab is now placed in a corresponding position adjacent to the southern stalls, and continues 'he died April ye 12th in the 32nd year of his age the character of an honest man beloved by his workmen and those he dealt with'.

In the concrete floor of the north aisle are remains of an 18th-century floor stone, now in very poor condition.

Carved Stones

On the east bench of the porch is a medieval gable finial (either from the old south porch or western bellcote) with a simple later cross still attached. On the west bench is a stone bowl, probably a mortar or 'creeing trough' of post-medieval date; these are often mistaken for items of ecclesiastical origin and brought into churches.

Historical Notes

1794 William Hutchinson, the first of the Durham historians, simply notes that the church is a 'neat edifice', and that it was once prebendal to Auckland College.

1834 Mackenzie and Ross (II, 279) provide the first detailed description of the building:

It is an ancient structure consisting of a nave with a north aisle, a chancel and a low western tower. The aisle is formed by three pointed arches, supported by cylindrical pillars, but there is no arch over the entrance into the chancel;. The east window consists of three pointed lights under an elliptical arch, and the south window of the chancel is pointed. A window on the south side of the nave is surmounted by an elliptical arch, with pointed compartments; and in the north wall, which as taken down and rebuilt some years ago, are three lancet lights. The font is a bason cut into the top of a truncated cone. A gallery was erected at the west end of the church in 1780 by John Cuthbert, Esq., of Wittom Castle; and another has since been added over the north aisle.

1845-50 A useful description written at this period by Rev John Mitchison (when a school boy) is preserved in Durham Cathedral Library (ref Addl. MS 234)

The double bell cote is apparently ancient though quite plain and is surmounted by its original cross with 4 gabled base. The porch is the best feature in this terribly-mutilated little church. Its outer door is E.E. blunt-pointed - a drop arch - very similar to the two doors leading N and S into the E Transept of Durham Cathedral. Its well-moulded dripstone springs from roses. It still retains the gabled base of its cross. Its inner door is plain Norm with square lintel and slightly-recessed tympanum. There are no ancient window, although it is clear from the internal forms that the present S. windows have replaced square headed Dec or Perp ones. The church visibly slopes inside from N to S, being built on the side of the hill shelving towards the Wear. The chancel arch has disappeared. The N aisle is separated from the nave by three plain pointed arches springing from cylinders with square bases: their capitals are obscured by a gallery. The font is apparently the original Norm one, a plain stone barrel, diminishing from the base upwards. In the chancel floor are two Frosterley marble slabs, one of them with a faintly traceable cross, - evidently the altar slab: the other probably that of the aisle altar. The church was formerly prebendal to Auckland.

1857 Fordyce (I, 621-622) more or less repeats Mackenzie and Ross' description (including the rather puzzling reference to the 'low western tower' but provides some additional information, particularly as regards 19th-century changes. The helmet suspended upon the north wall had been 'found in the neighbourhood'. A 'very fine' stained glass window had been placed in the church in 1845 at the expense of Donald MacLean, M.P. 'About 16 years ago' a large stove, had been placed near the font and in 1854 an organ had been erected in the western gallery; each had cost 20 guineas'. A new clock had been presented a few years previously by Rev W. Warde and Mrs Flintoff, and was placed above the south porch. The church had been re-roofed and undergone considerable repairs in 1830, at a cost of £100.

- 1894 The most detailed description of the old church was provided by the vicar, the Rev J.F.Hodgson, when the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle visited the church (Hodgson 1895, 57-83); Hodgson wrote copiously on antiquarian subjects, often railing against the removal of old features in churches, although a few years later presiding over the destruction of his own.
- 1896-1902 The church was rebuilt, except for the short length of the south wall of the nave containing the south door, and the north arcade; the architect was C.Hodgson Fowler.

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.

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|------|------|---|
| 152 | 1824 | Erecting a gallery |
| 408 | 1900 | Restoring etc. |
| 2383 | 1931 | Erection of an oak reredos |
| 4990 | 1967 | Construction of a flight of steps (in the churchyard) |

The Structural History of the Church

Any reconstruction of the structural history of the church must rely heavily on Hodgson's article. He saw the original church, the principal surviving feature of which was the south door, as dating from the very beginning of the 12th century, with the north aisle being added c 1195-1200 after Henry II sold the royal Manor of Witton to Henry de Pudsey. He records that the blocked east window of the aisle was a single lancet, with 'usual chamfer being reduced almost to vanishment'; it was backed by a broad and flat rebate. The south porch, which he dated to c 1245-50 had a segmental pointed arch with roll and fillet moulding continued down the sides and a hoodmould. At the end of the 15th or early in the 16th century flat leaded roofs had replaced the original steep-pitched ones - although the old bellcote was retained - and 'two flat or nearly flat perpendicular windows of considerable size' were inserted in the west and south walls of the nave. In 1780 a gallery was constructed, access to it being by a covered staircase built onto the west end, the former west window becoming a doorway. A little later the chancel arch was removed to allow the construction of 'two enormous pews'. c1850 a window which Hodges termed 'hideous' and of 'village-mason origin', filled 'if possible, with still more hideous glass' was inserted to the south-east of the chancel in memory of Thomas Hendry Hopper of Witton Castle and another new window replaced the 15th century one on the south of the nave, two smaller ones being broken out further west, one to light the gallery. The north wall of the aisle was 'reset in the meanest and most brutal manner conceivable'.

Useful plans of the old church are to be found in Archdeacon Thorp's plan book²

The Churchyard

The churchyard is roughly rectangular, and slopes quite steeply downwards to the main street of the village on the south. The church stands towards the north-east corner; the approach, from a gateway set centrally on the south side of the churchyard, is by a flight of steps (installed in 1967) rising to the south porch. The churchyard monuments have obviously been thinned out at some time; a scatter of headstones, mostly of 19th-century date survive, along with some recumbent slabs, some disappearing beneath the turf. A little to the east of the south porch is an old cross shaft with chamfered angles set on a square base, now carrying a stone drum with a sundial dated '1793'. Some distance to the south, to the west of an old yew tree, is a puzzling monument or section of a monument consisting of a rectangular block 0.90 m long by 0.35 m wide, and 0.55 m high, with a simple moulded band at each end and its top cut to a U-section; it looks of late 17th/18th century character, but remains a puzzle.

Archaeological Assessment

The floor of the nave and aisle is of concrete, except for boarded pew platforms; the chancel floor has stone slabs between boarding beneath the choir stalls, and the sanctuary is tiled. The present heating pipes are above floor level, but the sunken boiler chamber at the west end of the aisle suggests that there has been an underfloor heating system. As with any medieval church or church on a medieval site, any disturbance of floor levels will require archaeological monitoring as it is likely that earlier structural remains etc survive, although it is likely that these will have suffered considerable disturbance.

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² Durham University Library Addl. MS 82-85 PLANS 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

References

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