

NORTHERN ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

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NORTH TYNE STEEPLECHASE

Visiting churches at St. John Lee, Chollerton, Humshaugh, Wark and Simonburn
With Gunnerton as a possible encore

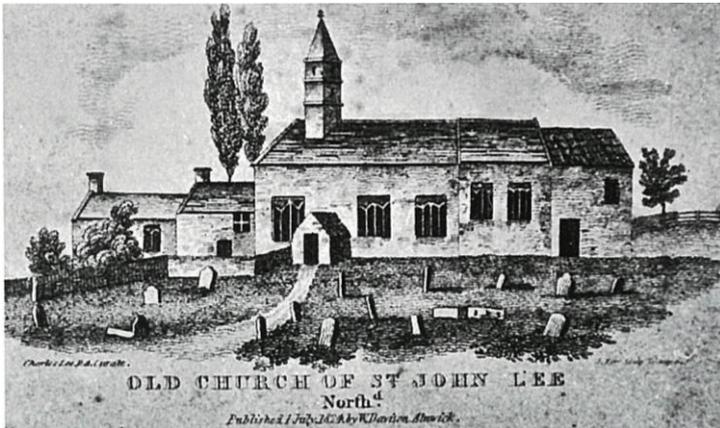
Saturday 31st August 2024

Tour Information

(Much indebted to Peter Ryder *Reading the Fabric: An Investigative Guide to the Medieval Churches of Northumberland*)

Church of St. John of Beverley, St. John Lee

Beautifully situated on a wooded hill looking across the Tyne to Hexham, on an ancient Christian site previously occupied by the 7th century hermitage of St. John of Beverley. A medieval church stood here until 1818, when John Dobson (not known for his sensitivity towards ancient fabric!) swept it away in favour of his plain preaching box with west tower. Happily, William Searle Hicks remodelled this in 1885/6 and added the chancel, all in his attractive free Perpendicular style including a magnificent display of carved woodwork in the roof structures and the Chancel screen.



Before Dobson

from Ryder: Reading the Fabric



After Hicks

Photos: Chris Downs



Roof detail



Screen detail

By way of complementing this woodwork, the church contains some fine stained glass windows dating from the late 19th/early 20th centuries, likely to have been commissioned from artists recommended by Hicks.

Some ancient stones which survived Dobson are to be seen within the church, including a prehistoric cup-and-ring stone and a Roman altar converted to a sundial. Outside there is a fine Frosterley marble grave slab with Lombardic inscription, possibly 14th century, and some fine 18th century headstones.

Adjacent to the church is the fine rectory, also designed by Hicks in 1885/6.



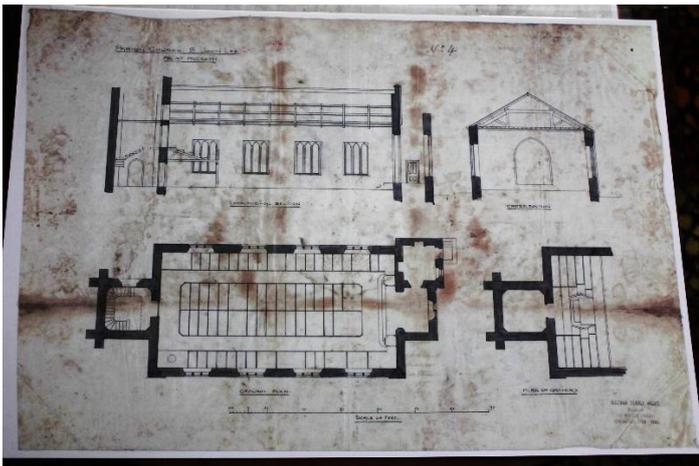
Stained glass depicting Northumbrian saints



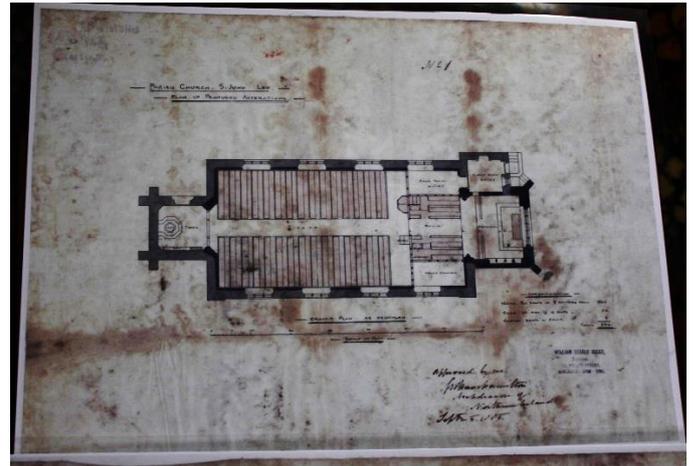
Roman altar re-cycled as sundial



Frosterley slab with Lombardic inscription
Photo: Hugh Dixon



Hicks's survey drawing of Dobson's design



Hicks's 'as proposed' drawing of 1885



Prehistoric cup-and-ring stone

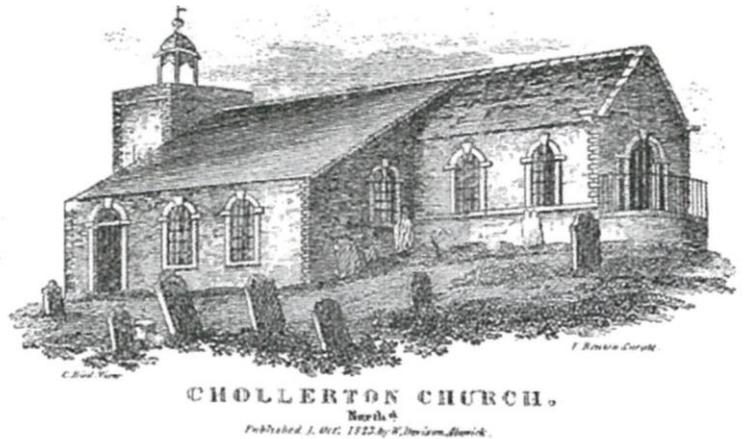
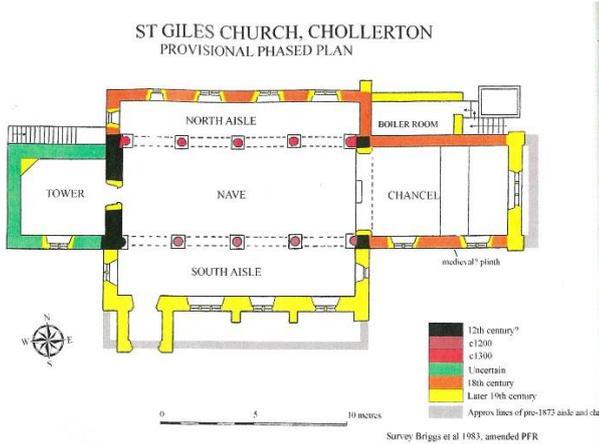
Photo: Simon Cotterill



The Rectory

Church of St. Giles, Chollerton

One of the most picturesque and coherent gothic churches in the area, but 'twas not always thus. Its many layers of history begin with the Romans, who (as also at All Saints, Lanchester) unknowingly provided the monolithic circular columns that the 12th century (?) builders used for the south arcade. The north arcade is of 14th century form. Both may run on the lines of the side walls of an Anglo-Saxon nave. The tower, of uncertain pre-1823 date, was presumably originally a defensive structure with its only entrance that at first floor level on the north side. It may have been medieval in origin, rebuilt or re-cased as part of a general classical make-over in the mid-18th century and then given its upper storey, parapets, corner pinnacles and distinctive 2-stage octagonal bell-cote (originally shingled, now clad with scalloped red clay tiles and grey-green slates) as part of the overall transformation of the building to Victorian Gothic in 1873. Peter Ryder believes that this restoration (architect unidentified) involved the reduction of the south aisle and shortening of the chancel (see his phased plan and the 1823 engraving).



South arcade with Roman columns



Exterior from the south-east

Photos: Chris Downs

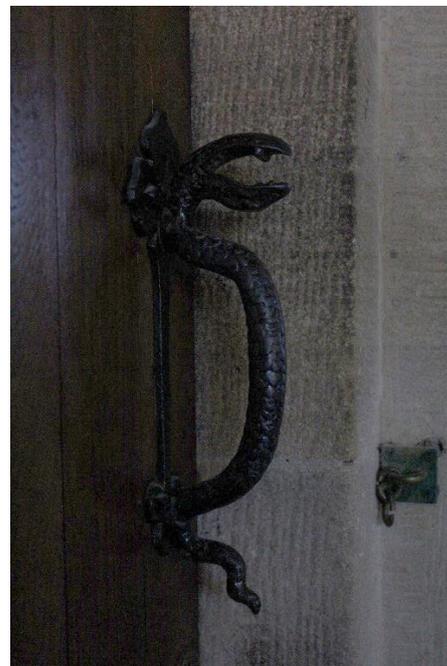
Again unwittingly, the Romans provided an early font, formed by inverting and hollowing-out one of their altars (dedicated to Jupiter). In 1827 this was found buried in the churchyard, presumably having been interred when superseded by the attractive 13th century example (with fine Jacobean oak cover) in current use. Various other ancient stones and cross-slabs are built into the floor and walls (especially of the porch) or displayed loose in the building. These include (in the east wall of the south aisle) a slab inscribed to Henry Widdrington of Colwell which, unusually for its 1637 date, bears a simple cross. This perhaps being a statement of faith by the recusant Widdrington family. More Jacobean woodwork – apparently re-used domestic panelling - lines the east wall of the Chancel and forms backings to the choir stalls. The chancel contains three 19th century stained glass windows (none signed but two perhaps by William Wailes?). A charming Arts-and-Crafts detail (if it's still there) is the latch to the door between nave and tower. This takes the form of a serpent into whose mouth you have to insert your thumb in order to operate the latch!



Roman altar recycled as font



13th century font with Jacobean oak cover



Serpent latch



Jacobean panelling on east wall of chancel



Jacobean panelling backing Choir stalls

The churchyard contains the remarkable headstone of John Saint, owner of Cocklaw Fulling Mill, carved with detailed low-relief depictions of the mill and its machinery.

Beside the southern gate to the churchyard stands a stable and hearse-house thought to date from the early nineteenth century, incorporating what may be re-used small early medieval windows to either side of its doorway.



John Saint's headstone

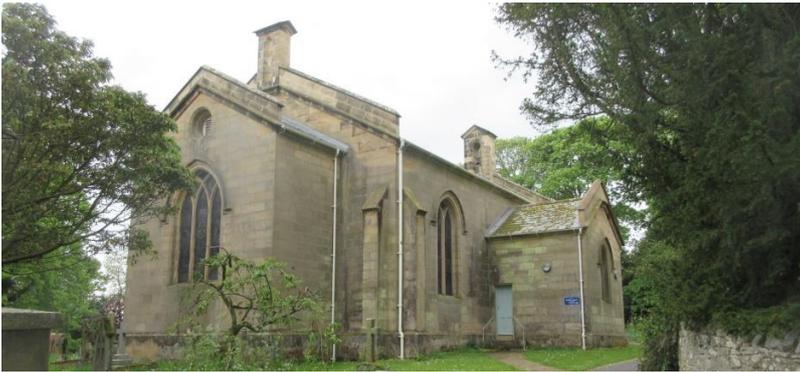


Stable and hearse-house

Church of St. Peter, Humshaugh

Built in 1818 by the Governors of Greenwich Hospital, as part of the division of 'the Great Parish' of Simondburn (*sic*) which originally extended as far as Carter Bar on the Scottish border and covered over 260 square miles - the largest parish in England. It is one of four churches designed by the Hospital's Clerk of Works, Henry Seward (1778-1848), a Londoner whose training under Sir John Soane is reflected in the efficiency of design and, perhaps, the eccentricity of his gable parapets. Built as just a Chapel of Ease, it has no tower but instead two bell cotes, one curiously 'blind'. Its late-Georgian, simple gothic character remains intact. Even the interior is largely unaffected by some high-quality later additions. It displays some fine box pews and one of the windows on the south side has excellent stained glass by Charles Eamer Kempe, 1901.

Don't miss, just south of the church, the headstone of Thomas Nixon, mason and operative builder of the chapel.



Exterior from north-east

Photo: Hugh Dixon



Interior looking west

Photo: A Buildings Fan



Kempe window

Photo: Mike Quinn



Churchwardens' staffs with the keys of St. Peter



Thomas Nixon's headstone

Photos: Hugh Dixon

Church of St. Michael, Wark

Also built in 1818 by the Governors of Greenwich Hospital to designs by Henry Seward. Apparently for land-holding reasons it is not in Wark, once the caput of a regality with its own motte-and-bailey, but a mile to the north. There is a strong whiff of Georgian entitlement in the way the church presides over its neat and now rather regimented churchyard with its ally, the rectory (contemporary with the church and also by Seward) present but exclusive in its walled garden. In detail it is clearly a cousin of Humshaugh; it even has two bellcotes but here both are 'blind'. The tower proclaims parochial status but no mediaeval pretence. The stone walls are ashlar smooth; clasping buttresses resemble pilasters; and battlements owe less to the demands of ancient defence than to Robert Adam's 'castle style'. The interior is still Georgian, too, but tidily modified with furnishings to meet requirements of Victorian ecclesiology.



Exterior from the north-west, with the former rectory to the right

Photo: Hugh Dixon



Interior looking east

Photo: Undiscovered Scotland

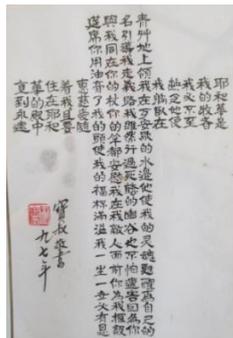


Interior looking west

Photo: Hugh Dixon



St Michael's dragon having a bad day



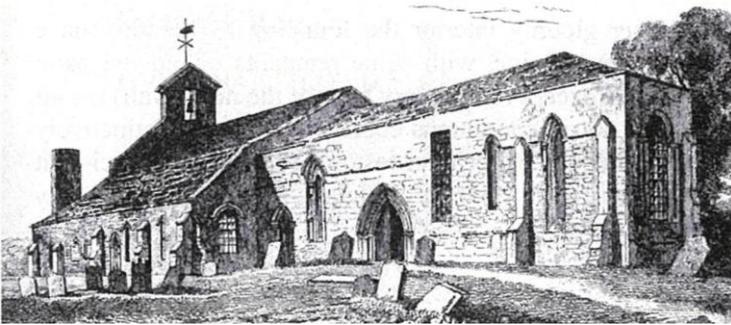
Psalm 23 in Chinese master calligraphy



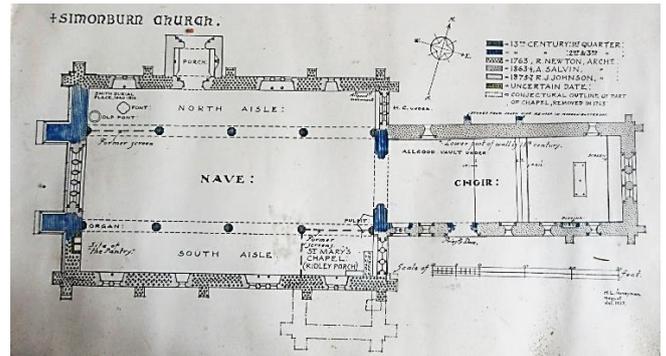
Stuart Ridley's rugby ball and millstone monument 2015

Church of St. Mungo, Simonburn

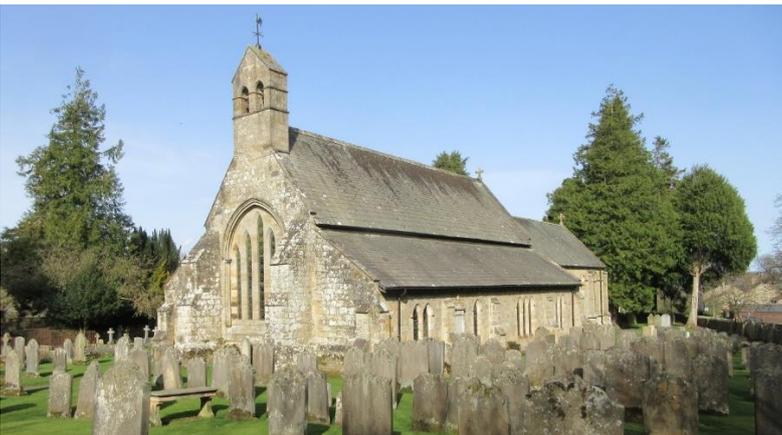
The mother church of ‘The Great Parish’ has existed long enough to leave puzzles a-plenty. Peter Ryder, noting Anglo-Saxon building stones and the location close to a pilgrimage route from Tyne to Coquet, poses a possible monastic site. A church there certainly was and by the 13th century it achieved its present impressive scale – except that apart from the arcades of that period most of what is now to be seen dates from rebuilding by Robert and William Newton (north and south aisles, 1763), and then Victorian re-workings by earnest mediaeval revivalists Anthony Salvin (chancel, 1863-4) and Robert Johnson (west end, chancel arch and porch, 1875-7) - the latter crowning his achievements with the fine lychgate (1885). The remnants of the monument to Cuthbert Ridley (d.1637) are a rare Renaissance survival, and Matthew Nobles’s Allgood monument (1860) has a lighting system inspired, surely, by Baroque Rome. Then there is much more, including fine late 19th century stained glass by Charles Eamer Kempe



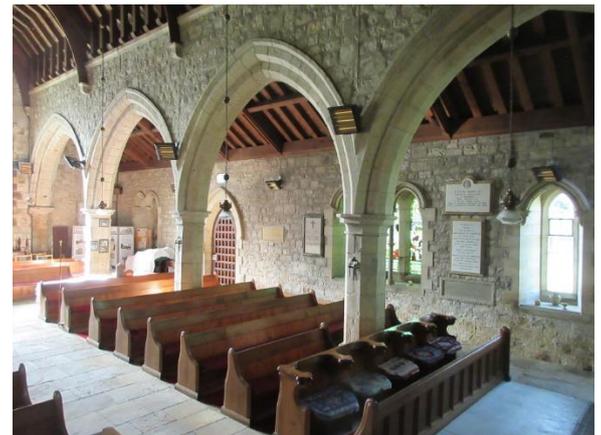
South-East view in 1825 before the Victorian rebuildings



Phased plan by Henry Honeyman 1937



Exterior from the south-west



North arcade

Photos: Hugh Dixon



Monument to Cuthbert Ridley, Rector 1604-1627
Photo: Simon Cotterill



Saxon cross-shaft
Photo: Mike Quinn



Lych gate by R.J. Johnson

Photo: W.F. Millar

Church of St. Christopher, Gunnerton

Peter Ryder believed that there was a medieval chapel at Gunnerton, but even he couldn't find its site. The present church was designed by the then curate, Revd. J.C. Hawes, in 1899. Clearly an amateur design with its somewhat clumsy massing seen externally, but it seems that on this occasion God really was in the details, with his Arts-and-Crafts hat on. Internally the light and airy space works beautifully.



In 2004-6 a major restoration and re-ordering was carried out under the direction of Vincente Stienlet. The west gallery was removed to allow insertion of new facilities but happily Vincente re-used the panels of naturalistic carving from the gallery front in the new work. The stained glass by William Tillyer in the circular window above also dates from this restoration and the original colour scheme of the interior was restored after careful research.



Four medieval stones built into the east wall of the porch may be from the lost chapel, or could have been brought from Chollerton to add a spurious touch of authenticity to the site of the new church!

