

Norham Church (St Cuthberts) Brief History

Norham is the place where St Aidan crossed the Tweed on his way from Iona to establish his monastery at Lindisfarne or Holy Island in A.D. 635.

It is said that when a stone church was built at Lindisfarne the wooden structure was transferred to Norham. The preaching cross on the village green may be on the site of this church.

The first stone church in Norham was founded in A.D. 830. The site of this church is probably to the east of the present church where there is now a clump of large yew trees in the churchyard.

Celtic stones found in the churchyard have been cemented into a square pillar which may be seen beside the font. They include parts of more than one cross shaft as well as a cross head.

The coffin of St Cuthbert was brought from Lindisfarne to Norham in A.D. 875 when Danish invaders were threatening the monastery (they burnt it shortly afterwards). After many wanderings, the coffin was finally buried at Durham and the cathedral was built over it. The bones of St Ceolwulph, King of Northumbria and later a monk, were brought from Warkworth and buried in the porch of the first stone church at Norham, which was dedicated to St Peter, St Cuthbert and St Ceolwulph. Later, Gospatric, first Earl of Northumberland, was buried in the same church.

The present building was begun in 1165 and was built at the same time as Norham castle, with the same architect. 850 years later a number of events are taking place in Norham to celebrate this. The parts of this building which remain from its earliest days are: the chancel except the sanctuary (see glossary for definitions); the arches on the south side of the nave and the wall above them, three pillar bases on the north side of the nave, and the foundations of the side walls.

It was in Norham church in 1292 that John Balliol did homage to King Edward I of England for the kingdom of Scotland. (The announcement of King Edward's decision in favour of John Balliol rather than Robert Bruce was made in Berwick castle where the railway station now stands.)

In 1320 Robert Bruce occupied and fortified Norham church while besieging the castle. The east end of the church (which may have been rounded) was damaged during this occupation. It was replaced in 1340 by the present "square" end with its large early English style window. The mullions of this window were replaced by a poor copy before 1875 when the present glass was inserted in memory of the Revd William Clark King, Vicar 1855-73. The mullions were replaced again in 1953 with the same design.

The church (or probably the nave) is said to have been roofless for a hundred years. This period is probably from 1513 (Battle of Flodden Field) to 1619 when the parishioners restored the church. They demolished the aisles and built a wall to replace what was left of the north arcade. A wall was also built to fill in the arches of the south arcade. (A water-colour at the back of the church shows how this was done.) The south aisle was rebuilt in 1846, the north aisle in 1852. The pillars between the nave and the north aisle are octagonal and a few inches south of the original pillars which were round. Part of one of these round pillars can be seen near the pulpit. This piece of pillar was found during extensive repairs in 1883/84, when twenty inches of mud was removed from the floor, revealing pillar bases on both sides of the nave. The arches on the south side of the nave are the widest Norman arches to be found in a parish church still in use.

During the clearance of the mud in 1883 the effigy of an unknown crusader (of about 1300) was found near the present side altar. It was placed in the south wall of the chancel, presumably its original position. The feet of this effigy are a restoration.

The north transept, containing the organ, with a boiler chamber (no longer in use) below, was built in 1883/4.

Originally the nave was longer than its present five arches. The water-colour of 1835 (already mentioned) shows six arches and part of a seventh. The present tower, built in 1837, occupies most of the space of the sixth arch.

The vestry, on the north side of the chancel, though not an ancient structure, appears to be on the site of an older vestry.

Entering the church through the porch in the south-west corner of the building, we see straight ahead the font, of Swinton stone, given in about 1842, a copy of Norman style, made by a member of the Young family, stonemasons, in Norham.

Originally it was nearer the main door but in the same line from it as it is now. Near the font are stacked ancient stones found in 1953 inside the sanctuary wall when it was grouted and re-pointed. It is thought that the 600-year-old sanctuary foundations were affected by the flooding of the Tweed in 1948. The Norman foundations, 800 years old, seem to have stood up even to this. The loose stones by the font are thought by some to be from the older stone church.

But pausing in the middle of the west end of the church and looking east one has a good view of the general proportions of the whole building. Light is provided by two skylights in the nave. The fine chancel arch has alternate red and white stones. This feature is repeated in the arch over the vestry door and is also found at Holy Island.

Still standing at the west end of the church it is worth turning round to face west for a moment. Between two windows of 19th century glass showing St Aidan and St Cuthbert, are the royal arms of King Charles II carved in oak. They have never been coloured. They were brought from Durham Cathedral when Dr Gilly was Vicar (1831-55). The Jacobean style table nearby was presented to the church in the same period.

Going eastwards along the north aisle you will pass a tapestry copy of Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper. It was made and presented to the church in 1965 by Miss Dorothy Pape, a parishioner. If you look across the church to the opposite wall the shapes of former pew ends can be seen where the stone is lighter. Further along the wall nearer you another patch of lighter stone shows the position of an earlier organ smaller than the present one.

The organ has two manuals and a pedal board. The "great" organ as well as the "swell" organ is enclosed in a box with adjustable shutters. The pulpit and the Vicar's stall are 17th century work and were brought to Norham in Dr Gilly's time. They were made in the Restoration period under the direction of Bishop Cosin; the Vicar's stall is described in one plan as Bishop Cosin's desk and has on it the arms of the See of Durham.

Between the organ and the pulpit, on the east wall of the aisle, are some 17th century tombstones brought in from the churchyard for preservation.

At the entrance to the chancel, we find two flower stands of recent acquisition though of Jacobean workmanship. The clergy stalls in the chancel, containing Jacobean materials, have been made from an old family pew in the church. The wall on your left as you enter the chancel is perhaps the oldest part of the church.

The wrought iron communion rails date from the 1950s. They contain emblems of St Peter (cross keys), St Cuthbert (eider Duck), and St Ceolwulph (crown) reminding us of the dedication of the former church. The oak altar was given in 1975 by Mrs E. de Clermont of Morris Hall. It was designed and made by Mr Douglas Simpson, a parishioner. The brass candlesticks on the altar are Jacobean though recently acquired: they have an iron ring on one foot for chaining like the earliest lectern bibles. The cross is a modern memorial gift to match the candlesticks. The piscina on the south wall of the sanctuary, like the rest of this end of the church, is 14th century work. Its height shows that the present sanctuary floor is higher than the original floor here.

The effigy of an unknown crusader, mentioned earlier, lies under a rich but badly worn canopy in the decorated English style, between the sanctuary and the ancient "priest's door" on the south side of the chancel. On the opposite side of the chancel is the effigy of Dr Gilly (died 1855) whose grave is in the churchyard. In the south-west corner of the chancel there is a well-constructed niche above the choir stalls. Its purpose is unknown; it does not appear ever to have been a window.

Returning to the nave one can see the fine brass lectern, a copy of the medieval lectern in Southwell Cathedral. On the pillar of the chancel arch above the lectern there is a mason's mark known elsewhere only at Trondheim Cathedral in Norway. Near the lectern is Bishop Cosin's desk, already described.

At the east end of the south aisle is the chapel of the Good Shepherd given in memory of John Henry Burnup by his sister Alice. It was dedicated in 1953 by George Clay Hubback, formerly Bishop of Calcutta and Metropolitan of India.

On the south wall of the nave there is a picture of unknown origin presented by Miss Horne of Horncliffe. A little further west is a model of a coble complete with salmon nets to remind us of the occupation of many in the parish. The model was made by Mr Douglas Simpson. Further west there is a tablet in memory of Daniel Laidler, the Piper of Loos, who was awarded the Victoria Cross in 1915; his grave, unmarked, is in the churchyard. Beside the door is the banner of the Mothers' Union, made by Miss Dorothy Pape, presented in 1965. The colourful, attractive kneelers were made by local women.

There is a clock in the tower which faces on the east and west sides. It was given to mark the jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887 and strikes hourly. It was made by a well-known Northumbrian clock maker, Charles Taylor. At his request, he was buried as near as possible to one of his favourite clocks. His monument was restored in 1995 through the generosity of Norham Parish Council, Norham Local History Society, and Norham Parochial Church Council. Beside the clock bell hangs one other bell which is tolled for Sunday services, made in 1670.

There are some features worth noticing on the outside of the church. Turning left as you go out of the main door, look at the nave wall above the aisle roof near the chancel. You can see slanting marks on the stone which show that once there was a south transept with its roof ridge higher than the present nave. This means that the nave used to be higher than it is now.

The outstanding feature of the outside of the church is the rich Norman carving over five of the windows on the south side of the chancel. On the same wall, on the buttress between windows of two different styles there are hollows thought to have been used for sharpening arrows. The wall nearby is pitted as if by arrows missing a target. Going round to the other side of the chancel we can see four small windows above the vestry roof, probably the oldest windows in the church. Still further round, on the aisle wall, is a stone engraved with the names of churchwardens commemorating the rebuilding of the aisles.

The earliest plate belonging to the church is a chalice and paten bearing the Newcastle hallmarks for 1712. The registers date back to 1653, the Commonwealth period. The lack of earlier registers, earlier vessels, and the bell being dated 1670 suggest that there were losses due to pillaging by Cromwell's men as well as at the time of various earlier border raids.

For eight hundred years our church has stood between the village and the Tweed. All through that time worshippers and craftsmen have enriched and cared for it, and they are still doing so. All through that period the word of God has been proclaimed from the church and God's grace has been ministered here. As you enjoy the peace and beauty of this ancient building, pray here and so join yourself with the continuing tradition of its worship.