

II.—SOME ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARISH CHURCHES OF NORTHUMBERLAND.

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The lover of ecclesiastical architecture who has travelled much in England knows that the churches of Northumberland, as a whole, do not compare in beauty and splendour with those of some other counties whose history is less eventful and romantic. Situated in a district far from the quarries which provided the medieval sculptor-mason with his greatest opportunities, exposed to sea-winds and to the danger of Border raids, their character is generally plain and austere. It is true that the priory churches of Hexham and Tynemouth are exceptions to the rule, and are monuments which, for excellence of design and wealth of detail, are second to few in this country. The ordinary Northumbrian parish church, however, is a simple building. It seldom offers those problems which fascinate the antiquary in churches enlarged and transformed by the work of a long series of generations, gradually altering the original fabric until few traces of it are left. There are parts of the county in which old churches are few and far between, and in which restoration and rebuilding have done much to reduce their interest, where they remain. In the possession of so unique a reminder of the past as the Roman Wall, and of an unparalleled collection of castles and fortified houses, Northumberland offers special attractions to the historian; and, in the light of such a comparison, he may overlook its churches.

Nevertheless he is not likely to forget the part which these northern regions played in the early history of English Christianity. The names of the saints of the golden age of Northumbria—Aidan, Cuthbert, Oswald, Wilfrid, and Bede—still have power to kindle the imagination amid the scenes of their labours. At Hexham we are in touch with that glorious past, close to the battlefield on which Oswald raised the Cross of Christ, and to the hermitage of St. John of Beverley. We can still visit the crypt of that church of which Wilfrid's friend and biographer said that he had heard of no other building like it on this side of the Alps, and picture to ourselves the 'manifold house,' with its aisles and galleried walls, which stood above it, and the neighbouring church of St. Mary, 'built after the manner of a tower, and almost circular.' If we cannot assign so certain a date to the earliest parts of the neighbouring church of Corbridge, they may very well belong to the period before the Danish invasions; and here, as in the piers at Chollerton and the crypt at Hexham, we can see Roman stonework in the tower-arch, probably transferred from a Roman building to its present site. Danish inroads put an end to the Northumbrian monasteries, and the ruined churches of Lindisfarne and Tynemouth belonged to religious houses which rose after the Norman Conquest on those early sites; but the towers of Ovingham, Bywell St. Andrew, and Warden, beside the Tyne, and of the more remote churches of Bolam and Whittingham, belong, in whole or part, to a revival of church-building which, if it took place not long before the Conquest, displays no trace of Norman influence.

The century which followed the Conquest was marked by a great revival of monastic life in England; and this naturally had a powerful influence on church architecture. The churches of such monasteries as Tynemouth or Hexham, endowed with lands and revenues by wealthy benefactors, set a high architect-

ural standard to their neighbourhoods. Among the possessions of these convents of monks and canons were the advowsons of parish churches, the rectorial tithes of which they appropriated, either at once or in process of time. A very large number of the parish churches of the county were thus appropriated to monasteries; and it is very easy for an imaginative eye to discover points of resemblance between the fabrics of such buildings and the churches of the monasteries with which they were connected. It is quite possible, for instance, that the fine twelfth-century church of Norham owes something to the influence of Durham, the prior and convent of which were its permanent rectors; and it is always probable that masons who were employed upon the greater church may have been sent from time to time to work at the fabrics of churches which owed some allegiance to it.

Monks and canons were not the builders of parish churches. The appropriated rectories were sources of income which they employed for the up-keep of their own monasteries. As rectors, they were responsible for the repair of chancels; but a portion of this was frequently charged upon the stipends of the vicars, not monks but 'secular' priests, whom they presented to serve the cures of souls. For the rest of the church money had to be found by the parishioners. Thus, whether the masons employed at Norham came from Durham or not, the parishioners had to meet their share of the expense, and must be credited with the financial responsibility for the erection of the nave, with its massive piers and round arches. We may credit the prior and convent of Nostell with supplying the funds for the long chancel at Bamburgh; but the rest of the church was the property of the parish, and the marked difference between it and the chancel is a sign of divided duties. Frequently, and especially in the later middle ages, monastic proprietors allowed chancels to fall into decay or repaired them only so far as they were obliged

Their funds would not run to expensive buildings ; and, in parts of England where the laity was prosperous, the chancels of appropriated churches are often out of keeping with the magnificence of naves rebuilt by local benefactions. It may be noted that one of the finest chancels in Northumberland, that of Morpeth, belongs to a church which was never appropriated to a monastery, but had its individual rector ; and similarly the chancels at Ovingham and Stamfordham (the latter practically rebuilt in modern times) were built at a date before the prior and convent of Hexham entered upon the rectories.

Further, it cannot be doubted that most of our village churches were the work of local masons. Architecture was the characteristic art of the middle ages ; the stone-mason learned by experience to do what he could with the stone of his own neighbourhood, and thus came into existence those types of local architecture with the varieties of which the student soon becomes familiar. A county like Northumberland, with wide expanses of moorland and shallow rivers which gave no facility for carriage of stone by water, had to depend upon its own resources, and its stone assumed characteristic forms under the hand of native workers. Here and there is a twelfth-century church which speaks of skilled and probably imported labour. The apse of the chapel at Old Bewick, which was squared and buttressed externally in the fourteenth century, is a form which would hardly have been chosen by a native artist : a rectangular chancel was more in keeping with English tradition and was easier to build. At Warkworth and Heddon-on-the-Wall the chancels are rectangular, but are vaulted upon stone ribs, a type of ceiling which, employed here by practised hands, needed trained thought and exceptional skill in execution. Elsewhere, however, with few exceptions, we can see the home-grown artist-craftsman at work. In the plain architecture of the thirteenth-century churches of Bywell

St. Peter, Corbridge, and Ovingham, we may recognise the influence of the transept at Hexham, a masterly work which the builders of these churches must have watched with interest, and in which they may even have taken part.

The characteristic beauty of the smaller buildings, however, like the churches of Hartburn and Ingram, does not depend upon richness of moulding and sculpture, but upon the use of simple forms, such as the lancet window, with an instinctive dignity and sense of proportion, and in obedience to the requirements of local material. Doubtless the severe ideals of Cistercian architecture fostered, among masons throughout the North of England, a tendency to lay the whole emphasis of their work upon suitability of construction, and to pay little attention to ornament. The Augustinian priory church of Brinkburn is a striking example of beauty and grandeur of effect produced by work upon these lines; and the man responsible for this design, whose hand may possibly be seen also in the neighbouring church of Long Framlington, had a fertile brain full of originality. He evidently knew Cistercian churches: it was easy for him to do so, as Newminster, the influence of which may probably also be seen in the design of the east end of the south aisle at Bolam, lay not far off; but we may fairly suppose that his talent grew to its maturity upon Northumbrian soil, and that the material with which he experimented at Brinkburn came naturally to his hand as the proper object on which to expend his labour.

Occasional examples of an attempt at rich ornament may be noticed, but they are exceptional. The conventual church of Hexham is the only building in which elaborate mouldings, in this instance unsurpassed in beauty, play a large part in the design. At Brinkburn the fine north doorway is merely a detail in a building otherwise remarkable for its simplicity. Similarly,

the curious pier on the north side of the chancel at Whalton, with its vertical rows of dog-tooth, is an isolated piece of decorative art on which some individual mason has expended his fancy. Later on, in the fourteenth century, the hand of the provincial craftsman, trying to execute something out of the ordinary, is seen in the shallow foliage of capitals at Morpeth and Bothal; while the capitals of the fifteenth century piers in the chancel at Alnwick are odd instances of the work of a rustic artist whose performance was hardly equal to his intention. These features, however, like the primitive tracery of the east window of the south aisle at Felton, formed by piercings in a circular plate of stone, are merely incidental to general designs whose key-note is simplicity itself. In certain subordinate details of his buildings, as in a few instances of stone sedilia, the Northumbrian craftsman achieved some refinement; and the canopied tomb-recess in the chancel at Norham is a magnificent piece of work. His more ambitious attempts, however, such as the fourteenth century reredos at Stamfordham, are more interesting than beautiful.

It was during the thirteenth century that the truly characteristic features of Northumbrian church architecture asserted themselves. What these were we have attempted to show. The builders relied upon their command of graceful forms and their sense of proportion; they expressed themselves in the simplest language of their art, and, so to speak, in a local dialect which they were able to use to full advantage. Even where, as at Ford, or Mitford, or Stamfordham, their actual handiwork has been considerably affected by renovation, we can still admire their power of design; in this respect the early thirteenth century chancels of Bamburgh and Mitford can compare with any of the same date in the rest of the country. The spaciousness of such a church as Warden, depending for its effect upon the proportion of tall lancet window

openings, with wide internal splays, to the simple masonry of the building, gives a sense of satisfaction which is often wanting in more elaborate structures. The necessities of walling and lighting are met with an instinctive sense of fitness to the occasion. The design, like that of the north transept at Ponteland, has an abstract beauty of its own which conveys itself directly to us without the help of elaborate decoration.

After this date Northumberland has little of importance to show. The fine chancel at Morpeth, with considerable remains of ancient glass, was built early in the fourteenth century. Here and at Ponteland and Kirkharle we have good examples of the traceried windows which belong to the period. St. Michael's at Alnwick is a handsome town church of the fifteenth century, developed from a smaller structure, which has been absorbed within the present building with its broad aisles, and with its strongly buttressed tower at the south-west corner. Here it is interesting to read the history of the growth of the church through later accretions. Another story of growth can be read in the village church of Felton on the Coquet, the development of which stopped much earlier. Originally aisleless, the church was enlarged by the gradual addition of aisles, built in the usual way outside the existing walls of the nave, within which piers and arches were constructed, the old masonry beneath the arches being removed when the aisles were ready. The old church had a porch on the south side, the west face of which was covered by a short aisle or chapel. Subsequently, an aisle was built east of the porch, which was thrown into it by the removal of its east and west walls; but the inner doorway of the porch was left as it was, and forms part of the south arcade of the church.

Large churches such as Alnwick bear witness to the prosperity of the townsfolk, and the need for enlargement caused by the

foundation of chantry services which required new chapels and altars. We know how, towards the middle of the fifteenth century, the earl of Northumberland and his son, lord Poynings, joined with William Alnwick, bishop of Lincoln, a native of the place, and others, in founding a chantry in Alnwick church for two priests, one of whom was to keep a school there. Warkworth church was enlarged about the same time by the addition of a broad south aisle or chapel to the twelfth-century nave. There were few occasions on which the floor-space of a medieval church was needed for large congregations; the addition of chapels and the widening of aisles were due to the multiplication of chantry masses and the need for more altars. Thus, in an important community of well-to-do merchants like Newcastle, endowments of chantries and bequests of money for masses became constant in the later middle ages. The parish church of St. Nicholas and its dependent chapels of All Saints, St. John, and St. Andrew were enlarged or wholly rebuilt to meet the consequent requirements. If we could see them to-day as they were in the middle ages, we should find the aisles partitioned by screens dividing altar from altar, at which day by day the many priests attached to each church said the masses from which they derived their living. In 1501 there were eighteen such priests or chaplains at St. Nicholas's in addition to the vicar and parish curate, at All Saints' a curate and nine chaplains, at St. John's seven chaplains, at St. Andrew's a curate and two chaplains. Their stipends were small, on an average not more than five pounds a year, which, even in the currency of those days was not a princely salary; but their work was light, and, beyond their daily obligation to say mass and to join in saying the choir-offices, their parochial duties were confined to hearing confessions at Easter, and, in a few cases, to teaching the young the elements of Latin and plainsong.

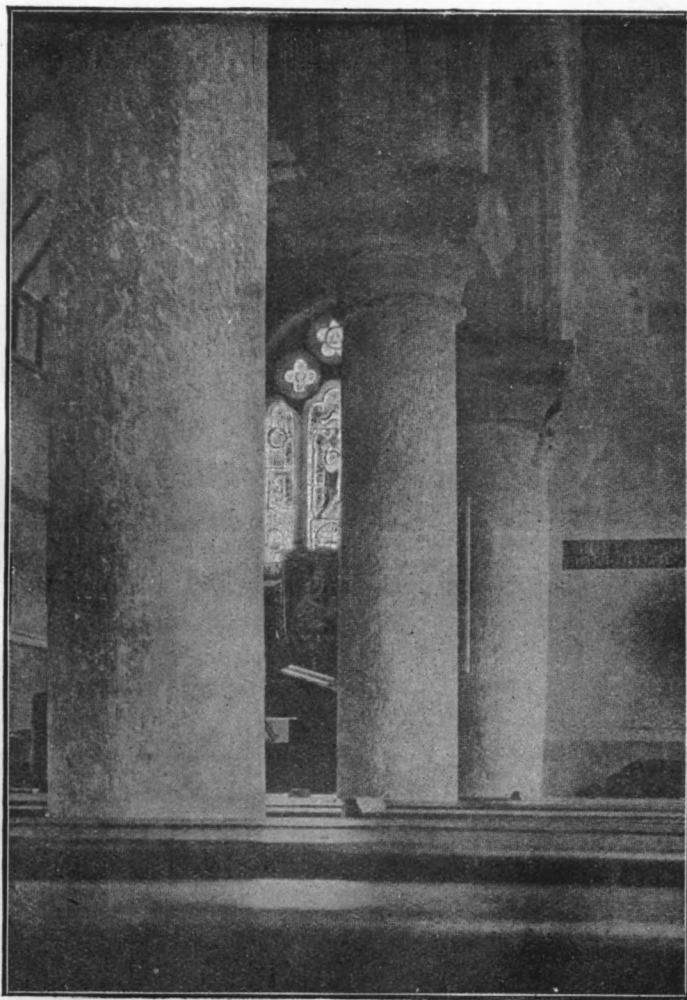
The fabrics of St. Nicholas's and St. John's, re-built during this period of general enlargement, are as free from ornament as those of the earlier churches to which we have referred. Even the tower of St. Nicholas's, of which Newcastle is justly proud, is singularly plain and massive in design: the whole effort of the master-mason who conceived it was concentrated upon leading the eye up to its crowning feature of a central pinnacle borne by flying buttresses. Internally, its only ornament is the vaulted ceiling of the ground floor, with its frame-work of stone ribs. Other towers of the same period, such as the famous Boston Stump or the towers which are the glory of many a Somerset village, may surpass it in grace; but few can equal it in dignity. It stands as a memorial of a day when religion was one of the every-day elements in life, and when rich men of business, like its donor, Robert Rhodes, gave freely of their substance to make the house of the Lord 'exceeding magnificent.'

The romance of church-building, as we are accustomed to think of it, died with the middle ages. The old purposes in obedience to which medieval churches had grown were abandoned with the suppression of monasteries and chantries. The professional architect, educated by foreign travel in the principles of the new classical architecture, gradually superseded the artist-mason, whose latest efforts are seen in the country houses of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, and in the villages of districts like the Cotswolds, where a tradition of design was handed down, in the neighbourhood of excellent stone quarries, from father to son through generations, and disappeared only under the pressure of modern industrialism. Still, churches were built, and the craftsmen who worked under the direction of architects continued to produce work of high excellence. We are learning to-day to realize that such churches as that of Berwick, built during the early years of the Commonwealth, have their historic and artistic

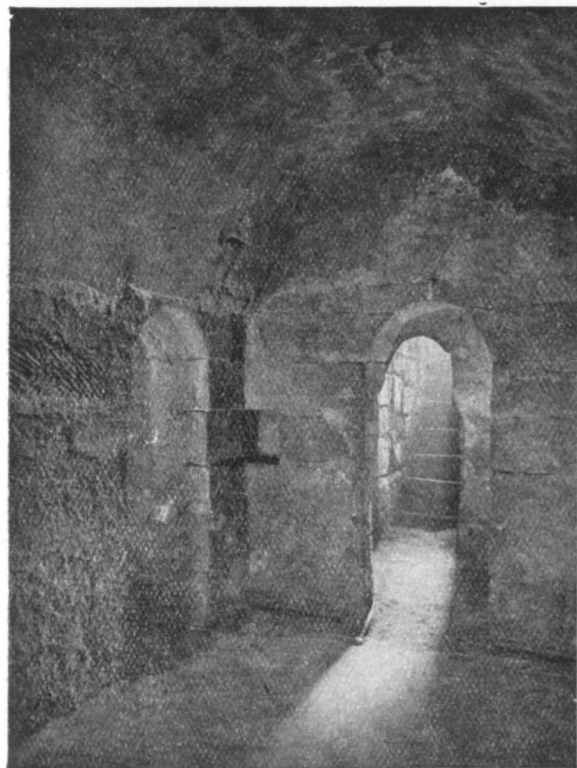
value. We may regret the destruction of the old church of All Saints in Newcastle ; but the building which took its place is a by no means negligible monument of late eighteenth century design, as regards both its structure and its furniture. It was inspired, no doubt, by the idea that the main purpose of a church is to be a theatre for the preacher rather than a place of worship ; but it is not therefore contemptible as a work of art. The Gothic revivalists of the nineteenth century, who were busy in Northumberland as elsewhere, swept away much honest and intelligent work in their zeal for medievalism. Their own attempts were too often merely imitative, and their enthusiasm for the past rendered them incapable of originality. Here and there individual architects of genius reproduced medieval forms with freshness of spirit and real creative power. Mr. Johnson's church of St. Matthew in Newcastle is a striking instance of what the modern Gothic architect can do ; and of the work of Mr. Pearson, one of the most imaginative of nineteenth century church architects, we have a typical example in St. George's at Cullercoats.

But to single out modern churches is perhaps invidious. While in the increasing need for church extension the present-day architect finds plenty of scope, it is becoming clearer to most people that alterations and additions to ancient buildings need to be considered with the utmost caution. We cannot be too careful in guarding the works of our forefathers from damage and decay. In their stones much of the social, as well as of the religious history of the country is written. Our churches are the chief of the visible links that bind us to the past ; and, amid the many problems which the Churchman of to-day has to face, the duty of maintaining their historic features intact, while taking into consideration the real needs of the modern world, cannot be overlooked or minimized.

NOTE.—The illustrations added to this article include one or two examples to which no allusion has been made in the text. Attention may be called to the interesting church of Ancroft with its massive twelfth century tower, and to the late segmental barrel-vault of the nave at Bellingham with its transverse ribs, an unusual piece of work to which the nearest parallels are to be found north of the Border.



CHOLLERTON Roman Monoliths in South Aisle.



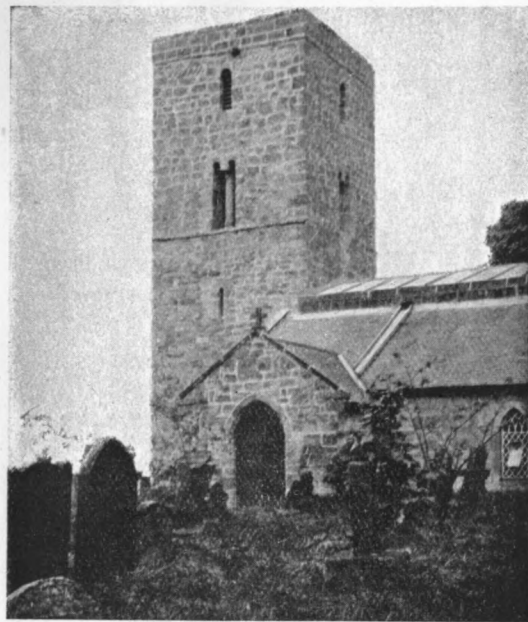
HEXHAM : Crypt, looking W.



CORBRIDGE : Nave and Tower-arch.



BYWELL ST. ANDREW : Tower, from S.W



BOLAM : Tower, from S.E.



EXTERIOR FROM THE SOUTH EAST.

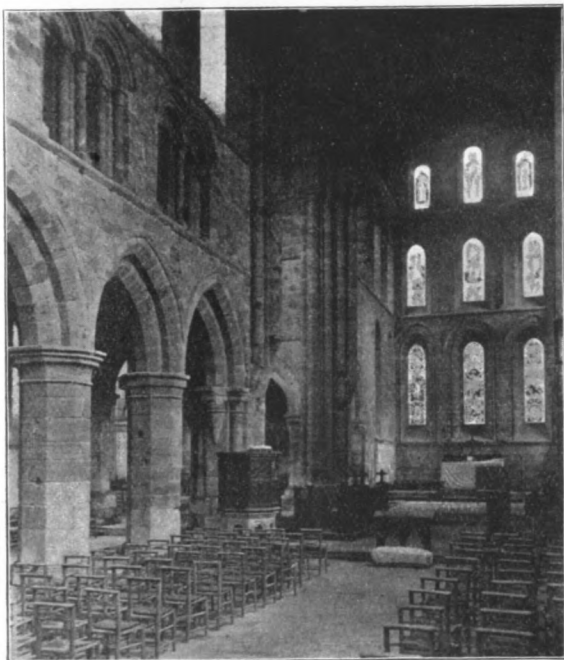


INTERIOR LOOKING EAST.
NORHAM CHURCH.

(From photographs by Mr. G. Thurlow Miller of Whitley).



MITFORD : South arcade of nave.
From photograph by the Rev. R. C. Macleod.

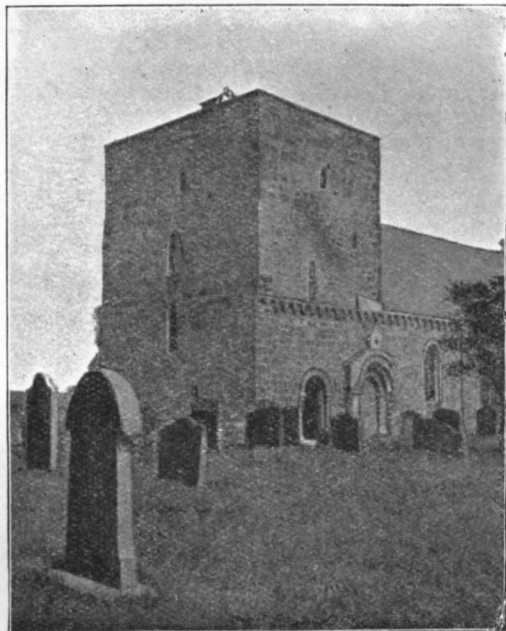


BRINKBURN PRIORY: Interior, looking East.

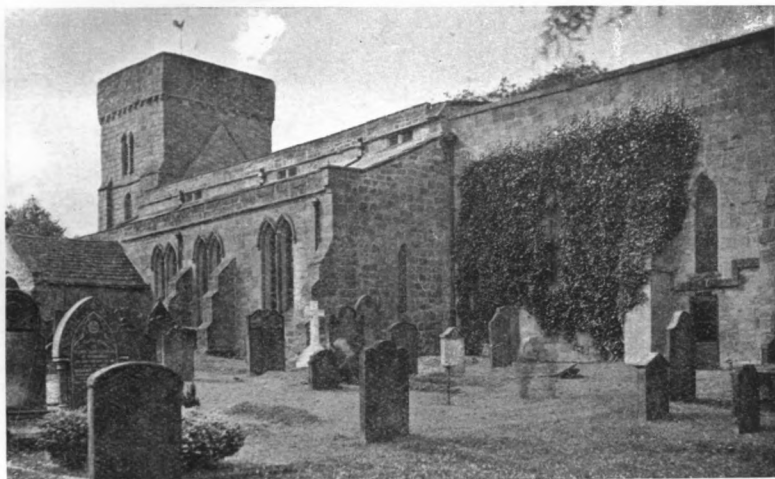


LONG FRAMLINGTON: Interior, looking East.

From photograph by Miss Mary Stephens.



ANCROFT : Tower from S.W.



HARTBURN : from S.E.

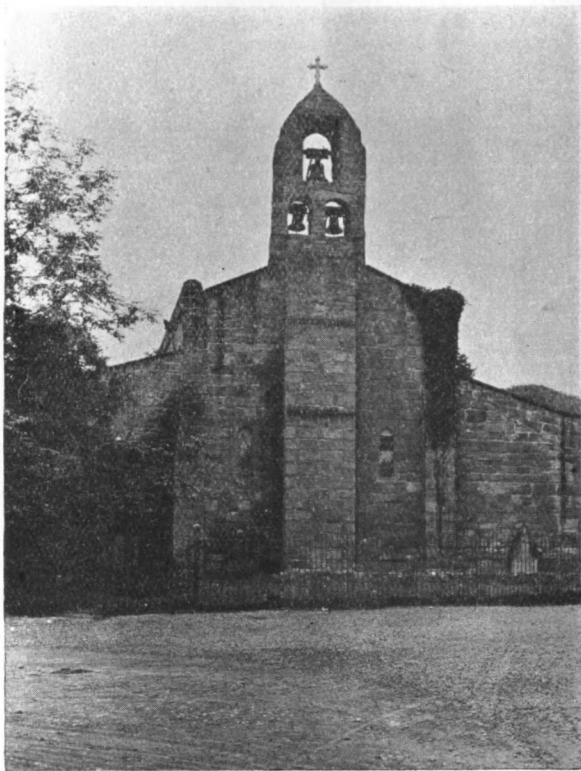


BYWELL ST. PETER : Interior, looking east.
(The chancel-arch is modern).

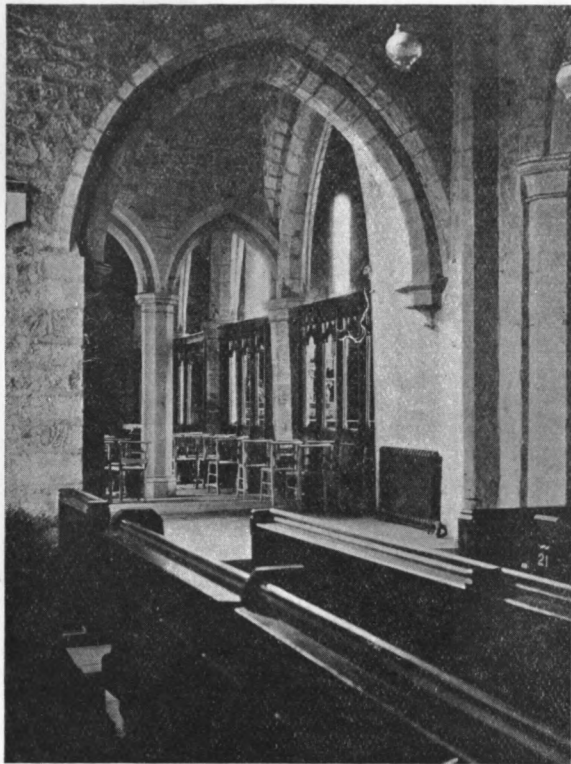


CORBRIDGE : Chancel, looking east.

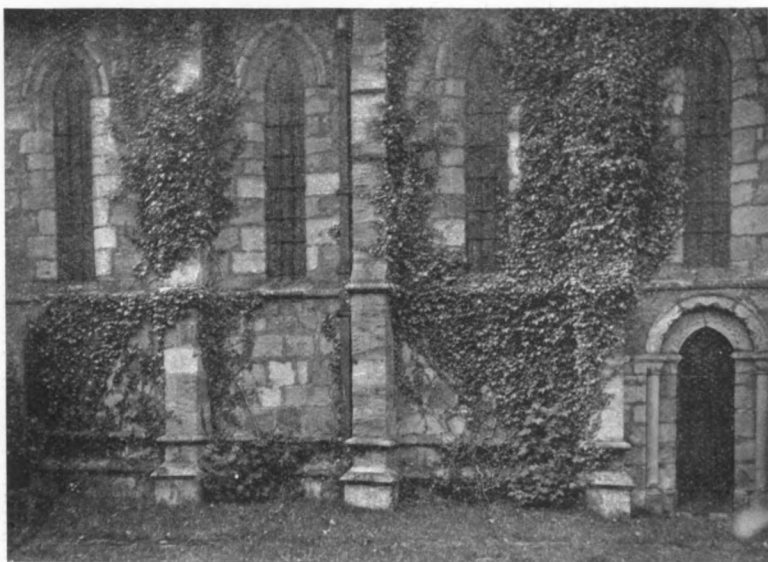
From photographs by Mr. C. J. Young.



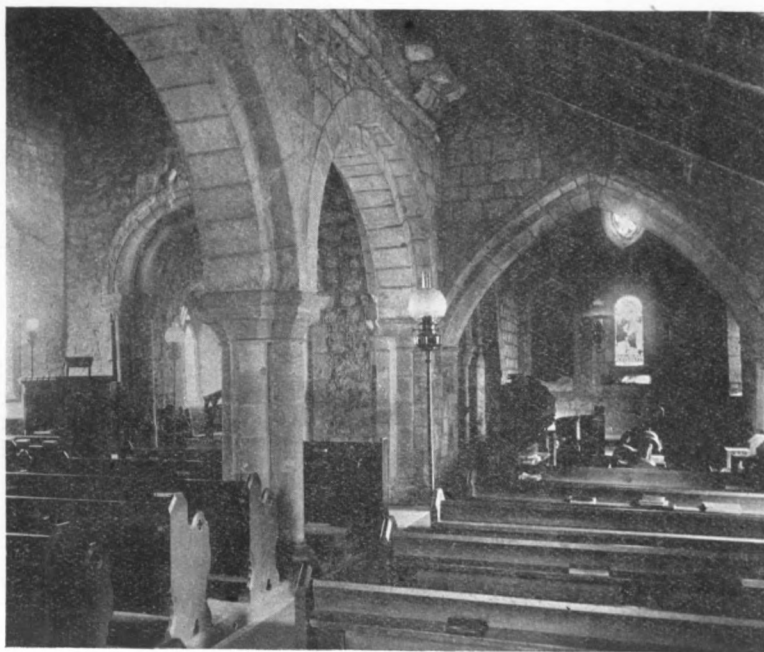
BOTHAL : West front.
From a photograph by Mr. C. J. Young.



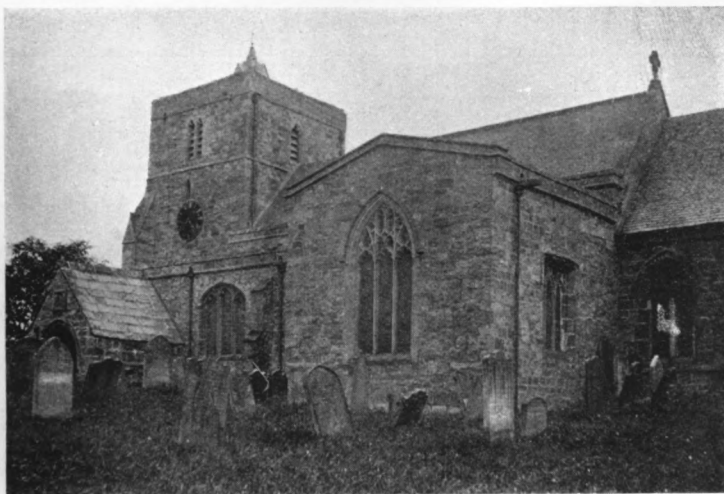
CORBRIDGE : North Transept and Chancel Aisle,
looking S.E.
(The pier and two arches in the aisle are modern).
From a photograph by Mr. C. J. Young.



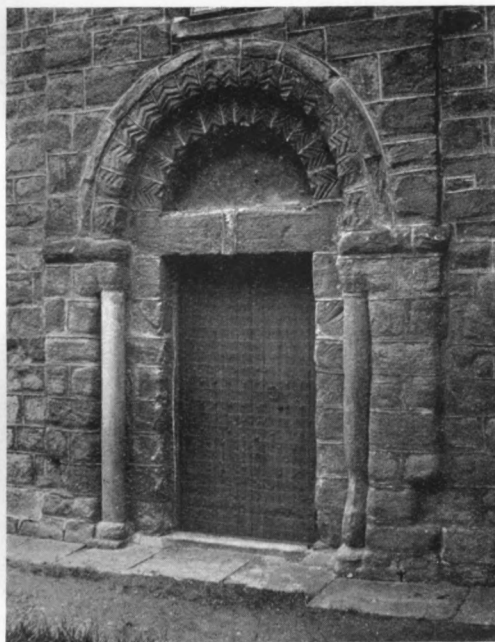
MITFORD : South wall of chancel.



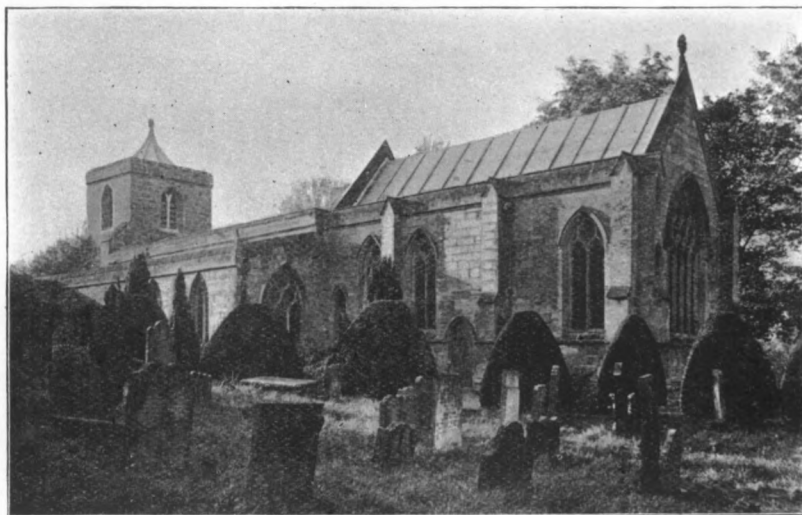
BOLAM : Interior, looking N.E., showing Raynes Chantry.



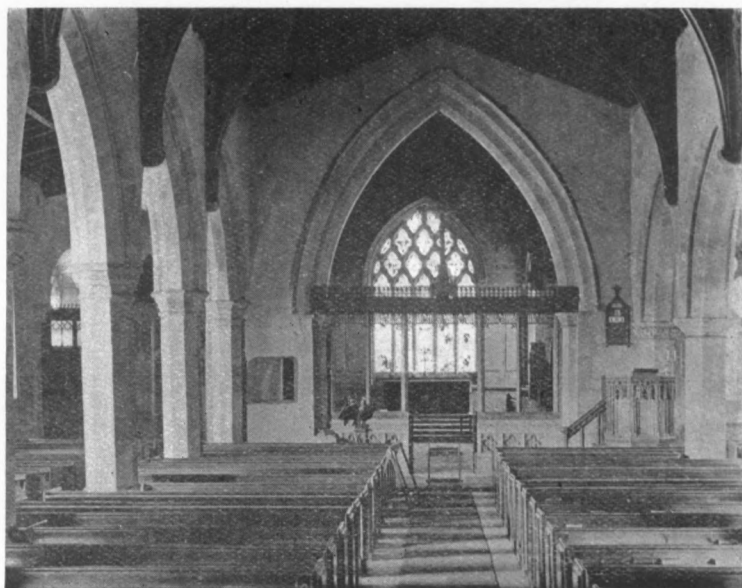
From S.E.



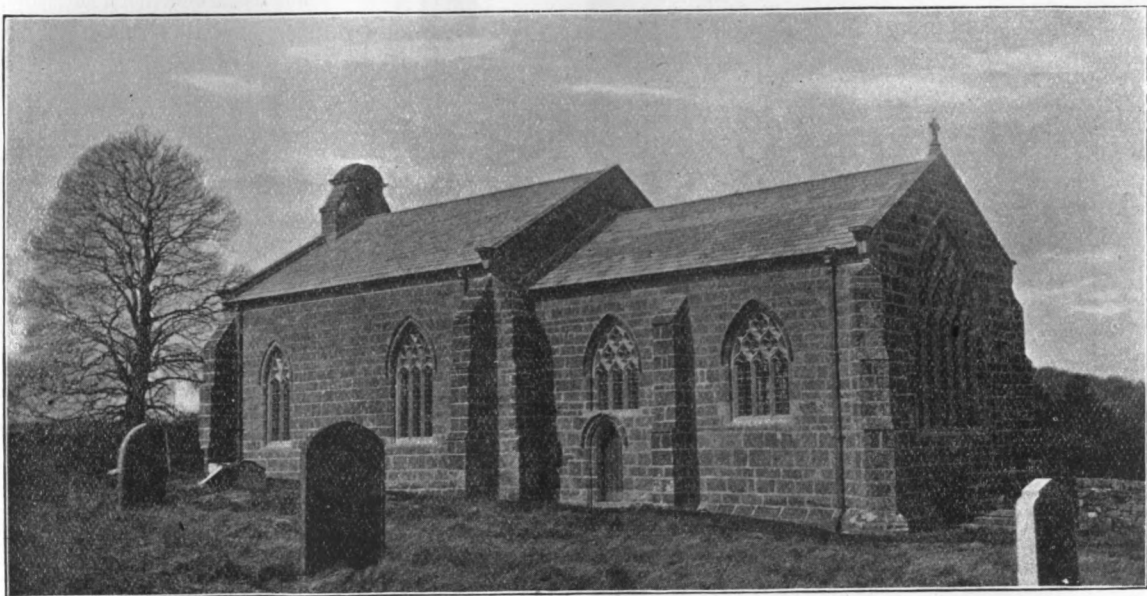
PONTELAND: West Doorway.
From photographs by Mr. Joseph Oswald.



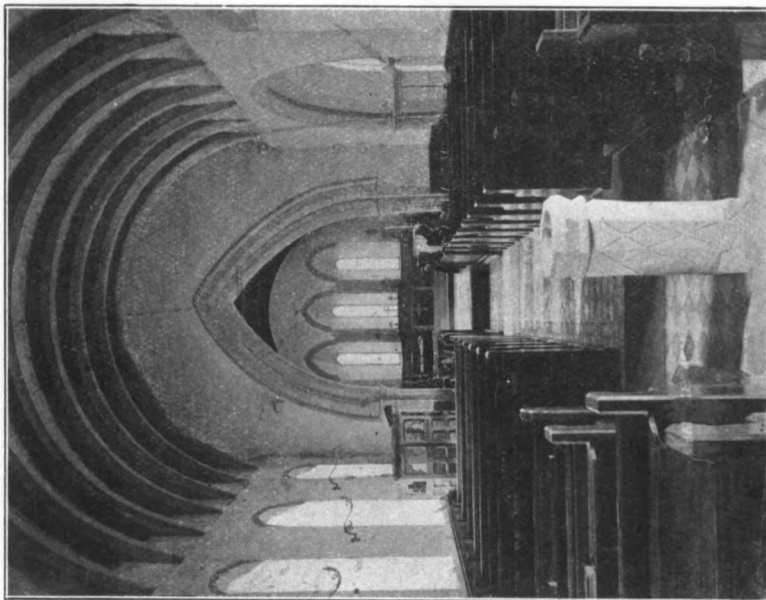
MORPETH : Exterior from S.E.



MORPETH : Interior looking east.



KIRKHARLE : Exterior from S.E.



BELLINGHAM: Interior, looking East.



BELTINGHAM.