

## V.—SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES ON SIMONBURN CHURCH.

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[Read on 25th August 1937.]

An account of Simonburn church by the late C. C. Hodges was published in vol. I of the present series of *Archæologia Aeliana*, with photographs, and a plan which unfortunately has errors which make it misleading to the student.<sup>1</sup> A full and accurate account of the Anglian carved stones at the church was given, but the history of the church itself had not been worked out in detail and, before writing an account for vol. xv of the *County History*, a fresh study of the subject had to be made and a fresh survey of the building. It seems advisable to print the results, and reproduce the new plan (plate III) here for record and comparison.

There is no known pre-Reformation reference to the church's dedication; Wallis (II, 50) said it was dedicated to St. Simon, but, owing to the influence of the late canon Rogers, it is now called St. Mungo's. On this I will only quote the dictum of C. J. Bates,<sup>2</sup> who evidently felt strongly about it:

"Simonburn is perhaps the grossest case of the loose way in which ecclesiastical dedications are determined. Bacon had no hesitation in putting it down to St. Simon from the mere name. . . .

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<sup>1</sup> For instance the position of the western buttresses on the plan would indicate that the nave was not designed to have a clearstory, whereas their true position proves the contrary.

<sup>2</sup> *Arch. Ael.*<sup>2</sup> XIII, 321.

It has escaped from this Scylla only to fall into the more fatal Charybdis of being categorically ascribed to St. Mungo of Glasgow, simply and solely because a well near the village—not one of those near the church but on the opposite side of the burn—is called 'Muggers<sup>3</sup> Well.'

The existence of a pre-Norman church on the present site is doubtful. The evidence advanced for it consists of five or six stone fragments, all, except one piece of a cross shaft,<sup>4</sup> small in size, and all re-hewn for use as pieces of ashlar. No Anglian masonry remains *in situ*, and the stones may easily have been brought from another site, perhaps from Nunwick<sup>5</sup> whose old local pronunciation suggests that if there was a chapel there it was dedicated to St. Mungo's great predecessor St. Ninian, or from the now vanished church of Shitleschester. It must, however, be added that the axis of the church runs considerably north of east, a point in favour of pre-conquest setting-out.

The existence of an early Norman church though difficult to prove is appropriate for conjecture. It would appear not unreasonable to suppose that bishop Walcher, when re-organizing the diocese of Durham,<sup>6</sup> converted his friend Waltheof's Tyndale lands into one huge parish with its various existing churches treated as chapels of a mother church at Simonburn, or Simon's Burgh as it may then have been called, the parish headquarters being placed there in order that its foreign parson (so rich a living being unlikely to be given to an Englishman) might be protected by a Norman fortress planned by Simon, the son-

<sup>3</sup> Muggers are travelling dealers in crockery and their name is sometimes given to some feature of a favourite camping place of muggers, tinkers, etc. It is only fair to say that a period which converted Cuthbert to "Cuddie" might have made Mungo into "Mugger"! There is a Muggers Hill in another part of the parish and it might be possible to settle the question by tracing its history.

<sup>4</sup> Not the lower part as stated by W. G. Collingwood in *Arch. Ael.* 1, 83, with an illustration which is less accurate than Hodges's drawing.

<sup>5</sup> There is still preserved at Nunwick a curious twisted column, similar in design to those in the crypt at Repton, but of so much better execution as to render its date uncertain.

<sup>6</sup> *Roger Hoveden*, H. T. Riley's translation, year 1072.

in-law of Wáltheof and for a short while his successor as lord of Tyndale. An early Norman dedication to St. Kentigern would be quite conceivable; Wáltheof's son Ughtred, grandson Gospatrick and daughter Matilda were all witnesses of earl David's *Inquisicio* which *circa* 1116 fixed the possessions of Glasgow cathedral.<sup>7</sup>

So complete is the lack of local records for this period that the very name of "Simondburn" is not found till the thirteenth century, and the earliest reference to the parish is February 1228-9, when Master Mathew, archdeacon of Cleveland, who had been presented to the living of "Simundeburn" by king Alexander II of Scotland, a descendant of Wáltheof, was instituted by Walter Gray, archbishop of York,<sup>8</sup> the see of Durham being vacant. But it is clear from the details of the nave pillars, and from the elaborately decorated doorway of which only one stone survives, that plans had been prepared at the end of the twelfth century, after king Richard made peace with Scotland, for a complete rebuilding of at least the nave of the church. We do not know whether the work was finished before the Interdict of 1207, the materials which had been prepared may have had long to wait before they were made use of, the spaciousness of the plan is more typical of the thirteenth century than of the twelfth. There is an interesting refinement in the design of the longitudinal section of the nave: the floor of the west bay is level, but the rest of the floor falls towards the east, following the natural slope of the ground, and to counteract the foreshortening so produced and accentuated by the fact that the nave narrows westwards, the pillars of the aisle arcades increase slightly in height as they go towards the west.

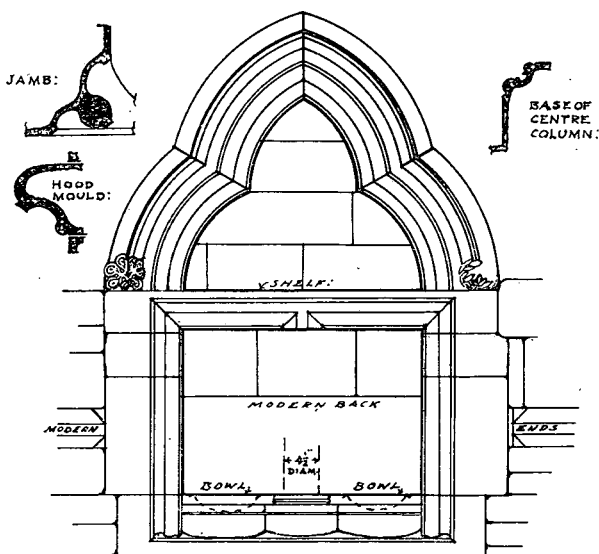
Master Mathew seems to have been a person of importance, and it is very likely that we owe to him the rebuilding of the choir and the somewhat Yorkshire type of

<sup>7</sup> *Scots Lore* I, 36, translation with notes by J. T. T. Brown.

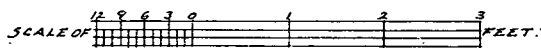
<sup>8</sup> *Surtees Soc.* LVI, 29.

detail employed: though the latter might, in any case, have been expected so near to Hexhamshire in the diocese of York. The western part of the choir was crossed by a rood loft, with a low south window to light the space beneath it; and the eastern part was screened off to form

*Simonburn Church.*  
*Piscina in choir.*



*Elevation.*



N.B. DETAILS OF MOULDINGS ARE TO DOUBLE SCALE.

a retrochoir, sacristy, or chapel with an altar of its own. There is a fine double piscina for the two altars and, until 1863, the window to the west of this had a higher sill than its neighbours so as to give head-room for sedilia. The east end of the new choir was set off before the demolition

of the earlier choir, about thirty feet long, and it was found that its axis was not on that of the nave; to correct this the side walls of the choir were curved in plan for some distance east of the chancel arch, as may still be seen in the lower part of the north wall where not rebuilt in 1863.

Mathew was followed, after what seems to have been a comparatively short time, by an even greater churchman in the person of Master Abel, who was presented by the king of Scots, or rather by the king's uncle and guardian Henry III, through whose influence he became successively canon of Glasgow, archdeacon of St. Andrews and, in 1253-4, bishop of St. Andrews.<sup>9</sup> Abel was one of those able English administrators to whose competence the "Golden Age" of Alexander III was probably more indebted for its prosperity than we are apt to think. A man with so many interests could hardly be expected to spend much time in Tyndale, but he witnessed the prior of Hexham's licence to Robert and Peter de L'isle to found a chantry in the chapel at Chipchase,<sup>10</sup> *circa* 1243, and it was almost certainly in his time that the east gable of the nave was rebuilt with a new chancel arch whose jambs had double chamfers continued round the arch without any impost mouldings, similar to examples at Rothbury and Newcastle.

Rather later in the century, perhaps in the time of Rufinus de Tonego, another archdeacon of Cleveland, who succeeded Master Abel, but probably *not* during the incumbency of the notorious pluralist Bouges de Clare, treasurer of York, who was appointed *circa* 1280, the rebuilding scheme was completed with some alterations and additions to the nave, including new aisles, a south chapel and a west front having a traceried window whose mullions survived till 1763. A clearstory formed part of the design,

<sup>9</sup> Several references for his life are given in Greenwell and Hunter Blair's *Durham Ecclesiastical Seals*, p. 603.

<sup>10</sup> Surtees Soc. XLVI, 99. The Lisles were rather a literary clan: four of them occur in professor J. Cox Russell's *Dictionary of Writers of Thirteenth Century England*; one of them was dean of York 1220-35.

but we cannot now be certain whether it had been built when the outbreak of the Scottish war of independence put a stop to church-building in North Tyndale for more than three hundred years. Urgent repairs continued to be attended to, at least till the Reformation, and some time during the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century the roofs of both the nave and choir of Simonburn church were lowered and covered with lead.<sup>11</sup>

The sixteenth century saw civilization in North Tyndale at its lowest ebb, and the once rich and sought-after living of Simonburn was rejected in 1596 by a "Master of Arts at Oxenforde of the Quen's College. . . . Deaminge his body unable to live in so troublesome a place, and his nature not well brooking the perverse nature of so crooked a people."<sup>12</sup> All the ecclesiastical buildings in Simonburn parish were neglected and several of them were in ruins when, in 1604, Cuthbert Ridley, a member of an old local family, became rector. For thirty-two years this good pastor laboured to repair the material and moral damage that had been done. Bellingham church was rebuilt, the choir of Haughton restored, and at Simonburn itself we may safely credit his rectorship not only with the repairing of the chancel roof but also with many improvements in furniture and decoration (the "Laudian" ecclesiological revival was in progress) and with the building of an entrance porch<sup>13</sup> and the restoration of the south chapel or Lady porch, whose altar had been endowed with lands at Tecket by his ancestors.<sup>14</sup> It is characteristic of him that he is last heard of, not many years before his death, going to the Court of High Commission in Durham to give evidence for a neighbour.<sup>15</sup> With a good feeling in

<sup>11</sup> Referred to as in need of repair in 1501. *Proceedings*<sup>3</sup> II, 224.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116. When the parish was divided in the nineteenth century, the first incumbents of two of the new subdivisions, Falstone and Greystead parishes, became insane after appointment.

<sup>13</sup> Referred to in documents. It was destroyed in 1763 and part of its sundial was built, upside down, into the porch added 1877.

<sup>14</sup> Hodgson MSS. Reference supplied by Miss M. H. Dodds.

<sup>15</sup> Surtees Soc. XXXIV, 22.

advance of his period he directed his body to be buried *outside* of the south window of the Lady, or Ridley's, porch.<sup>16</sup> His fine Jacobean monument<sup>17</sup> no doubt stood inside that part of the church.

Apart from a large vase-shaped font, whose date is uncertain, we find no more improvements at Simonburn till the time of the rev. Henry Wastell, who, like Master Mathew in the thirteenth century, came from Yorkshire. Wastell's name ought always to be mentioned here with respect, for he encouraged Wallis to write his *History of Northumberland*, he preserved a Roman stone found when the kitchen at the rectory was rebuilt, and he paid a shepherd to collect inscribed stones from a part of the Roman Wall, which was being destroyed to form the Carlisle road, and to bring them to the rectory for preservation.<sup>18</sup> In his time buttresses were added to Bellingham church and the nave of Simonburn was given a somewhat drastic restoration. To quote from the relevant minute:<sup>19</sup>

"Whereas at meeting in vestry on 1st June, 1762 it was agreed to order that the Parish Church of Simonburn should be repaired and beautified, the Side Isles bared and sacked and a Sashron put in the west end of the Church and Mr. Robert Newton be employed, to draw Plan and make Estimate of charge of repairs and alterations. We, the Minister, Churchwardens and principal Inhabitants of the said Parish assembled at a meeting legally called, Do approve of the Plan drawn by the said Robert Newton and laid before us and that same may be put into Execution we do order that 10d. in the Pound, according to the Pound Rent, be collected by the Churchwarden to pay the charges of repairs etc. Witness to our hand this 14th day of March in the year 1763."

Newton's estimate amounted to £124 18s. 4d. for the aisles and west window, and four guineas for repairing and

<sup>16</sup> Will of Cuthbert Ridley; extract supplied by Miss M. H. Dodds.

<sup>17</sup> Destroyed when the aisle was rebuilt in 1763, but its effigies still remain, see *Arch. Ael.*<sup>4</sup> vii, plate xviii, fig. 1. It was made in 1630.

<sup>18</sup> Surtees Soc. lxxx, 123 and 139. The rectory stone had been cut down to nine or ten inches square and was inscribed . . . VLPI . . . SABIN . . .

<sup>19</sup> Preserved at Nunwick, found by Miss M. H. Dodds, transcribed by Miss J. Stubbs.

whitewashing the nave. But the scheme was altered after approval by the meeting and the estimate actually accepted amounted to £125 5s. for the aisles and £18 for mending the plastering of the nave and whitewashing it. The first estimate is signed by Robert alone, but the second adds the signature of his son William, well known as architect of Howick Hall and of the Old Assembly Rooms in Newcastle.<sup>20</sup>

The Newtons took the aisle walls down to ground level and rebuilt them of greater height than before, but without either the south porch or the projecting part of the south chapel. Each aisle wall had three sash windows, of the form which archdeacon Sharpe's passion for light and air was introducing to nearly all the churches in Northumberland, and a door, and there was another sash window at the east end of each aisle. Sturdy buttresses were provided, and those at the corners were set on thirteenth-century foundations except at the south-east corner, where the older buttress was not in the right position and a new foundation was made out of old materials, pieces of plinth, etc. The "muntons" [*sic*] of the west window were cut out and a large sash window introduced in their place.

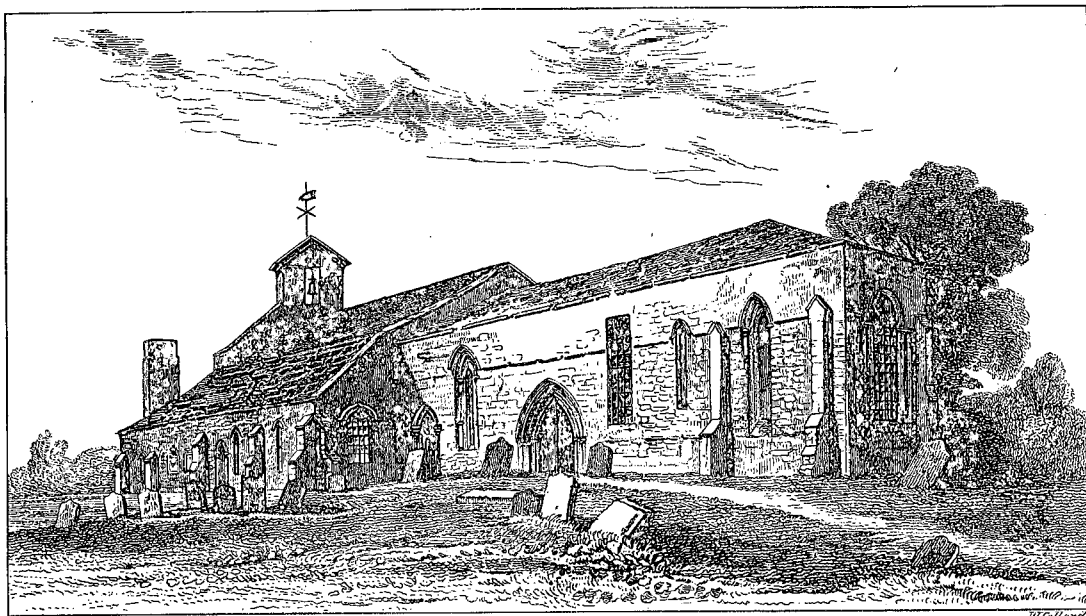
The choir escaped attention and had perhaps already been repaired and provided with the two sash windows, one in the east gable and one in the south side, which remained till 1863. Late in the seventeenth century the north side of the choir began to be used as a burial place for the Allgood family, and it was enclosed with iron rails.

Wastell was succeeded in 1771 by Dr. John Scott, an astute political journalist whose services to his party were rewarded by the living of Simonburn. He drove away Wallis from the district, tried to discourage John Hodgson from undertaking his *History of Northumberland*,<sup>21</sup> and

<sup>20</sup> For information about Robert, who was a shipwright before he became a builder, I am indebted to our member Mr. Harold Oswald.

<sup>21</sup> "What occasion is there for any more such histories?" *North Tyne Magazine* ix, no. 109.





SIMONBURN CHURCH IN 1840.

the only work known to have been done at the church during his long incumbency was in 1809,<sup>22</sup> when the nave and choir roofs were stripped of their lead. Lead was in demand for munition purposes in the year of Sir John Moore's death at Corunna, and the church had to be content with blue slates on a cheap wooden roof hipped at the east end.

In 1811 the vast parish of Simonburn was divided; Wark, Bellingham and Falstone churches regained their independence, and new parishes were formed at Thorneyburn and Greystead. The reduced living ceased to be a temptation to the government, and the nineteenth century rectors were all men who took their parochial responsibilities seriously. Shortly before 1825<sup>23</sup> the church was fitted with new pews, "much repaired," heated by a furnace at the west end of the south aisle, and given "a neat vestry" whose exact site is not now known. The south entrance may also have been altered, as there are discrepancies between its appearance on the engraving published by Davison in 1825 and Collard's view published in Hodgson's *History* in 1840, and reproduced here.

In 1863 the choir was entirely rebuilt except for the lower part of the north wall and part of the lower western part of the south wall, and its floor was relaid at a higher level so that there are no longer steps down to it from the nave. Old materials from the south side were used to face the north side and its buttresses, while the south wall was faced with new stone, and, to make all look new, the old masonry of windows was re-hewn, and so were, quite inexcusably, the beautiful thirteenth-century mouldings of the priest's door. Fortunately the piscina was not re-hewn, though it was taken out and reset at a higher level. For this work the rev. Meyrick Beebee was responsible, with Anthony Salvin of Durham as his architectural accomplice.

<sup>22</sup> MacKenzie, *Northumberland* II, 235-6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

About twelve years later, when canon Rogers was rector, the parishioners resolved to restore the nave, and, the old Yorkshire tradition still persisting, asked the architect who had restored Skelton church to undertake the work. He was unable to do so, and R. J. Johnson of Newcastle was employed instead. When the nave was re-opened on 4th September, 1877, a sum of £3,400<sup>24</sup> had been spent. The nave had new open-timber roofs, of good design, and the upper part of the west gable, which previously preserved the outline of the clearstory, had been rebuilt to suit them; the interior had been stripped of plaster, all the windows had been taken down and replaced by new windows which, it must be said, are of better design than the eighteenth century ones and both larger and more ornamental than those likely to have existed in the low aisles of the thirteenth-century nave. The south door was removed and a new north entrance porch built. The chancel arch was quite needlessly heightened and given incongruous moulded capitals and a hood-mould with carved stops representing the heads of St. Mungo, to whom canon Rogers had ascribed the dedication of the church, and St. Katherine, who, he thought, had an altar in the south aisle.<sup>25</sup> It was from the gable above the chancel arch that the Anglian stones above referred to are said to have come. New pews, pulpit, and font were of course provided, and, with the exception of the font,<sup>26</sup> these are no doubt better than their predecessors, for it is not likely that any seventeenth-century woodwork, other than the old oak chair which still stands in the chancel, would survive the restorations of 1763 and 1820. Robert

<sup>24</sup> *North Tyne Magazine* VIII, no. 92. The money was raised without a bazaar.

<sup>25</sup> *North Tyne Magazine* IX, no. 98. There may quite well have been two altars in the south chapel, but no evidence has ever been printed to connect one of them with St. Katherine, except a reference by canon Rogers to the "MSS. of the rev. H. B. Hyde, senior chaplain, Bengal Ecclesiastical Establishment." The church when complete could accommodate four or five altars besides the high altar.

<sup>26</sup> The old font which had been cast out was recently rescued and placed in the north aisle of the nave.

Newton's buttresses were spared, and so were the grand thirteenth-century buttresses of the west front. It is not recorded that the nave arcades were rebuilt, but John Hodgson's sketch plan of the church in 1838 shows arcades of five bays and now they are of only four.

Since 1877 the church has been kept in repair and its stonework is in excellent condition.

In conclusion I must gratefully acknowledge encouragement and help received from the present rector, the rev. W. D. Totten, and from Miss M. Hope Dodds.

†SIMONBURN church.

