

# Durham churches

## a programme of archaeological assessment

by Peter Ryder

*The Diocese of Durham have commissioned a series of archaeological assessments of medieval parish churches within the county. These entail investigation of the fabric and brief examination of faculty and other historical evidence. Most of these churches have aroused little interest since the antiquarian era. The assessment programme is allowing the revision of the structural histories of many buildings where previously unrecognised phases, ranging from pre-Conquest to post-medieval in date, can now be demonstrated. The nature and extent of 19th-century 'restoration' works has also never been adequately documented.*

The medieval parish churches of County Durham are overshadowed by the architectural grandeur of its Cathedral. Those in the Pennine foothills in the west of the county are often small, and have generally been heavily restored or rebuilt in the 19th century. In the east towards the sea is the lower ridge of Magnesian Limestone, with some larger churches, whilst the fertile vale of Tees further south has some particularly interesting buildings. Few Durham churches are well known, other than the celebrated Saxon survivals at Escombe, Jarrow and Monkwearmouth, and perhaps the Early English fabrics at Darlington and Hartlepool. However, 56 churches preserve substantial parts of their medieval structure, while another nine retain some elements, like the arcades at Greatham and Witton le Wear, the tower arch at South Shields or featureless fabric as at Bishopston.

Amongst these churches earlier medieval centuries (and in particular the 13th) are generally better represented than later periods, although the contrast is nowhere near as marked as in neighbouring Northumberland, where the outbreak of Border troubles in the late 1200s effectively ended church building, with a few exceptions such as Alnwick and Bamborough, sheltering beneath the walls of a major castle, or the parish churches

girdled by the town walls of Newcastle.

Durham churches have received some measure of antiquarian attention (more so, for example, than those of Yorkshire). The first useful accounts, although brief (and often highly derivative of each other), are provided by the county historians Hutchinson, Surtees, Mackenzie and Ross, and Fordyce, in the period 1780–1860. Over the next 50 years many churches were the subject of individual studies published by one of the local archaeological societies: either the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne (in the pages of their journal *Archaeologia Aeliana*, or, accompanying an account of a members' visit to the church, in their *Proceedings*) or in the *Transactions of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland*. The majority of such studies were penned by heavyweight architects or incumbents with an antiquarian bent, such as Charles Clement Hodges or the Rev Joseph Hodgson. Churches in Stockton Ward were described in detail in the one published regional volume of the *Victoria County History* (Page 1928). Two other useful sources from this period are Boyle's *Guide to Durham* (1892), which provides quite lengthy descriptions of all medieval buildings, and Hodgkin's *Durham* in Methuen's 'Little Guide' series (1913). More

recently comprehensive cover has been provided by Pevsner's 1953 *Buildings of England* volume. Its 1983 revision draws on some recent research, although it still ignores the medieval chancel of St Michael's, Bishopwearmouth, in the heart of Sunderland. More specialised recent study has been heavily weighted in favour of pre-Conquest churches: the Taylors recognise 11 Saxon churches within the county, with a further two 'doubtful' entries (Taylor & Taylor 1965, 716).

Since 1991 a series of archaeological assessments on medieval churches has been carried out on behalf of the Diocesan Advisory Committee. A typical assessment, carried out in around a week, comprises what might be termed a 'level 2 investigation' (terminology outlined in Ryder (1993, 1–6)). All parts of the church fabric to which access is practicable are examined in detail, and a description covering form, fabric types, and all architectural features prepared. These are recorded in the form of written notes and sketches, and a series of black-and-white photographs (usually one film per church). Valuable evidence often comes to light from conversations with incumbents, churchwardens and local residents, for example an apparently Roman tessellated pavement was found near the church at Trimdon in the 1950s and hushed

up for fear of archaeological intervention.

Resources do not allow extensive documentary research but faculties and other accounts of structural work in the Diocesan records, all known published studies of the church and in some cases, churchwardens' accounts and similar unpublished material are scanned. A phased ground plan is prepared, usually on the basis of an existing plan taken from a faculty or provided by the church architect. Additional resources might allow each church to be individually planned. Irregularities and anomalies in ground plans may point to previously unrecognised phases within the fabric: the available plans of Norton, for instance, all ignore obvious changes in alignment.

Following the written description, fittings, furnishings, monuments and lapidary material are described, a summary of historical sources given (usually including descriptions of the church provided by 19th-century historians), and a precis of existing faculties which relate to works that may have impinged on the fabric or sub-floor deposits in and around the church provided. An up-to-date interpretation of the structural history of the building is attempted and the report concludes with an account of the churchyard (its plan, boundary walls, associated buildings, and any significant memorials), an assessment of vulnerability, and priorities for recording work. The finished assessment, in the form of a ring-bound report of 10–20 A4 pages, is lodged with the diocese, and a copy given to each church.

Twenty-two Durham churches have now been surveyed in this way: 20 on behalf of the Diocese and the other two (Aycliffe and High Coniscliffe) out of personal interest. Of these substantial revisions have been made to the accepted developmental history in over half. As well as demonstrating the importance of close investigation of the church

fabric, the work has shown that many of the later 19th-century antiquarian accounts were written without reference to sources such as faculties which might give details of changes earlier in the same century. This underlines the potential for notable discoveries still to be made without sophisticated equipment or expensive techniques.

The churches investigated so far are listed below, with brief accounts of the current interpretation of their structural history. These are mini-interim reports and it is hoped that resources may become available for full publication of the survey.

### *Aycliffe, St Andrew*

Delightfully termed 'a fair average specimen of the rude old Durham churches of the third class' by the redoubtable Rev Hodgson (1890), the long-recognised Saxon core in the eastern part of the nave can now be shown to include a western extension, and perhaps the base of the tower as well. The 1881 restoration by Ewan Christian is well known, but an earlier one in 1835, when sash windows were replaced by a simple sub-Romanesque fenestration, was also documented (see Ryder 1988)

### *Barnard Castle, St Mary*

St Mary (Fig 1) is a large and complex church with much 19th-century alteration, possibly founded to replace an earlier church enclosed within the outer bailey of the Norman castle. The building was remodelled 1477–1485 by Richard, Duke of Gloucester, who apparently intended it to become collegiate. Its new clerestory overtopped the low tower at the west end of the north aisle. This tower was heightened in 1774 and, according to most published sources, completely rebuilt in 1874. Investigation showed that the medieval lower part of the tower survives, encased externally, with one

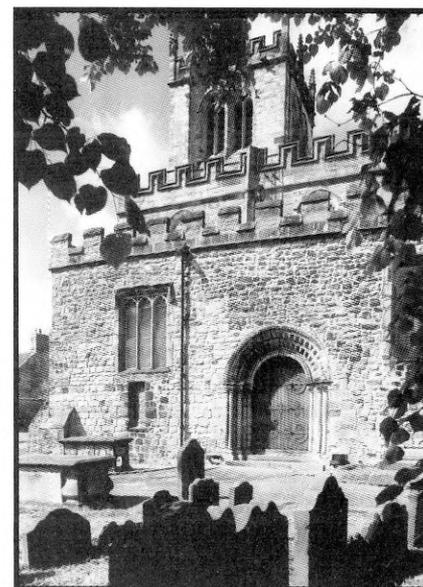


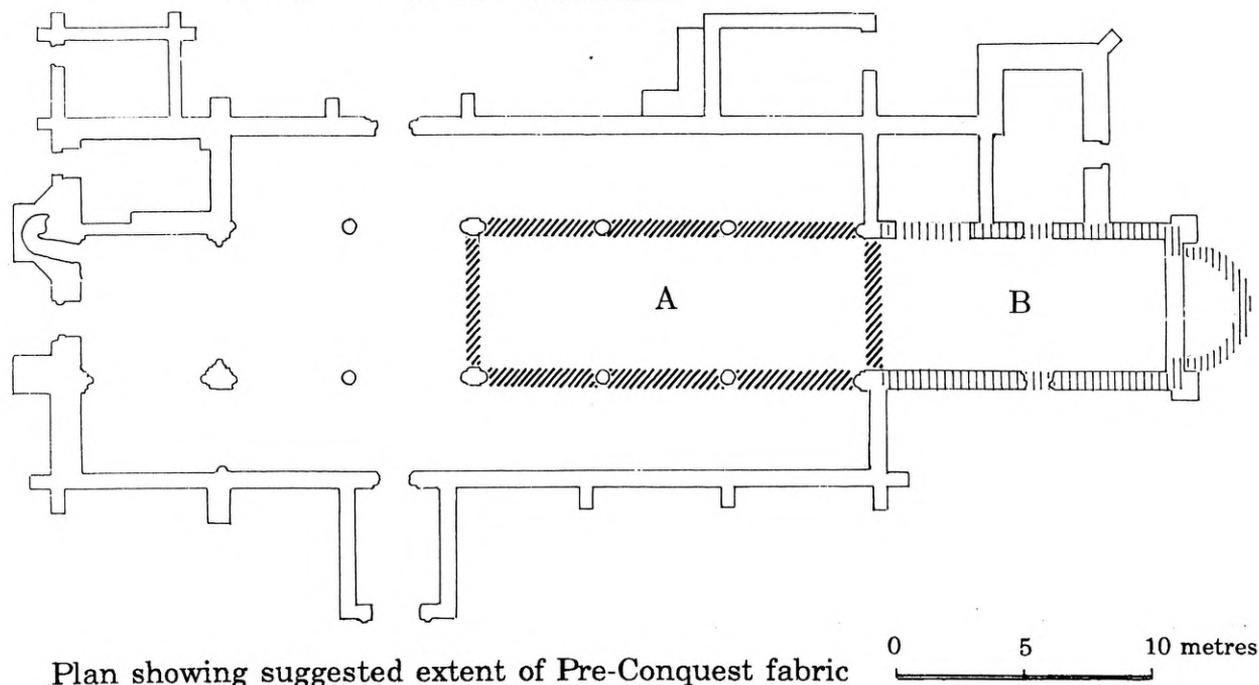
Fig 1 Barnard Castle, St Mary is a typically complex building. The aisle wall may be of c1200, with its fine doorway and strangely-positioned 'low side window'. The embattled clerestory is part of a late 15th-century remodelling. The tower beyond is of 1874, although recent assessment has shown that the lower part of its 13th-century predecessor was encased in the present fabric rather than completely removed (Photo: P Ryder)

of its 13th-century belfry openings still *in situ*.

### *Bishop Middleham, St Michael*

At this 12th-century two-cell church of generous proportions aisles were added to the nave and the chancel lengthened during the early 13th century. Apart from the addition of a clerestory and perhaps the heightening of aisle walls in the 15th or early 16th century, there were few later medieval changes, perhaps reflecting a decline in importance as the nearby Bishop's manor house was progressively abandoned in favour of Auckland Castle. Post-medieval changes include rebuilding of the north aisle in 1747; a phase of sash window insertion in 1802 and the usual restoration and re-medievalisation, here carried out in 1843–46 at the expense of Mrs Surtees, widow of the county historian.

## ST MARY & ST CUTHBERT CHESTER-LE-STREET



Plan showing suggested extent of Pre-Conquest fabric

A: Nave of Late C9/C10 Cathedral

B: Egelric's building of c1056, replacing earlier timber church (apse purely hypothetical!)

Fig 2 Chester le Street, St Mary & St Cuthbert: suggested extent of pre-Conquest fabric in present church (P Ryder)

### *Chester-le-Street, St Mary & St Cuthbert*

Examination of this important church raised the exciting possibility that parts of the Saxon cathedral (this was the seat of the diocese from 883–995) may still be above ground (Fig 2). Early fabric seems to survive in walls of the eastern part of the five-bay nave, although the evidence is rather tenuous: the tail ends of quoins visible internally at the north-east corner of the south aisle, and the scar of a removed west wall two bays from the west end. The chancel is slightly wider than the nave, and presumably later, though it still has some 'early' features in its fabric (which the Taylors have commented 'would be out of character except in the Anglo-Saxon period'). The square-section string course that seems to predate 12th-century

buttresses may represent the stone church recorded as being built here by Bishop Egelric c1056.

### *Church Kelloe, St Helen*

Perhaps best known for its spectacular Romanesque cross, disinterred in fragments from the fabric in 1854, this is a rather battered church with Saxon or early Norman fabric in its nave walls. The west end seems to have been truncated prior to the construction of the 12th-century west tower. The west wall north of the tower shows a couple of courses of herringbone work reminiscent of that at Seaham (which is generally accepted as a period-A Saxon building). The chancel seems to have been taken down and rebuilt, with a few old features being re-instated, in 1854.

### *Dalton le Dale, St Andrew*

St Andrew is an attractive little church usually seen as a relatively unaltered building of the 12th and 13th centuries. A long history of structural problems and repair, with a major post-medieval remodelling (a 1631 datestone may relate to this) disguised by the reuse of older features shows this to be an oversimplification. More recently there have been two phases of restoration: one in 1821 when a lath-and-plaster chancel arch was inserted and a second in 1907 when it was removed.

### *Durham, St Giles*

The nave of St Giles, with some almost Saxon features, probably represents the chapel of a hospital founded by Bishop Flambard in 1112



Fig 3 Pre-Conquest sculptural fragment, possibly of 8th-century date, built into the south aisle wall at Easington. Although Easington has been recognised as a potentially early site, this is the first confirmed pre-Conquest carved stone found (Photo: P Ryder)

and burned in 1143 when Bishop William de St Barbara was threatened by the usurper William Comyn. When the hospital was refounded c1180 by Bishop Le Puiset at Kepier the old chapel became the church of a new parish. The original building may have been cruciform – traces of a cross wall some distance from the present chancel arch may indicate the western arch of a crossing, and there are also hints of a northern chapel or transept. The present chancel dates from the Le Puiset refoundation. It is not clear why the chancel arch was set a metre or so beyond the east end of the older nave. Sadly major restoration and enlargement in the 19th century removed virtually the entire south side of the older church.

### *Durham, St Oswald*

Heavily Victorianised like St Giles, this large church may stand on the earliest ecclesiastical site in the city. Archaeological recording carried out after a serious fire in 1984 assisted interpretation of another complex building.<sup>1</sup> The earliest parts are of c1180, to which the cores of the present six-bay nave and west tower belong. Only the eastern four bays of

the arcades are of this date; it is not clear whether the western bays were rebuilt c1400, or whether the c1180 nave had an unaisled western section. Subsidence caused by local coal mining prompted major works in 1834, when the chancel and most of the aisle walls were completely rebuilt.

### *Easington, St Mary*

The church is substantially of c1200, except perhaps for the west tower which may be slightly earlier. There was a substantial remodelling in the 14th century and a heavy Victorian restoration. The early origins of the site were underlined by the discovery in the south aisle wall of a piece of white limestone carved with delicate plaitwork, perhaps dating to the 8th century and possibly an architectural fragment (Professor R Cramp pers comm) (Fig 3).

### *Egglescliffe Parish Church*

This church, whose original dedication is uncertain, has a late 11th- or early 12th-century core remodelled towards the end of the medieval period. Sculptural fragments, including turned baluster

shafts, and the large sub-circular churchyard, point to earlier origins. Any renewal of decayed stonework in the external elevations needs to be accompanied by archaeological recording; the details of some features, such as the blocked north door, have already been lost.

### *Elwick Hall, St Peter*

Predominantly a late 12th- and 13th-century building complicated by several post-medieval phases including a remodelling in the 1660s, the early origins of St Peter are confirmed by two sculptural fragments and a small window (probably reused) which has, uniquely for the church, dressings of gritstone.

### *Gainford, St Mary*

At this early monastic site and estate centre, the assessment has raised some intriguing possibilities, both from the fabric of the church itself, and the wider landscape. This is a case where features in the plan of the church – changes in the alignment and thickness of walls – rather than visible masonry (the interior is all plastered) hint at the survival of one or more phases of fabric predating the visible 13th-century work. Antiquarian opinion has always seen this church as the product of a single building programme. The evidence of old maps and present landscape features indicates a possible large sub-circular enclosure taking in the church and most of the village green. This site is a priority for further fieldwork.

### *Heighington, St Michael*

On an island site in the centre of one of Durham's finest village greens, St Michael was clearly an important church by the mid 12th century. It has a fine Norman west tower and a rare, structurally-separate chancel and sanctuary. It has recently been

claimed as a Saxon building with inserted Romanesque features (Clack 1986), although this interpretation is partly based on incorrect readings of the 19th-century faculty evidence, and can perhaps be queried.

### *High Coniscliffe, St Edwin*

The principal elements in this church – a 12th-century nave, with 13th-century aisle, chancel and west tower – are well known. Less well documented are the various 19th-century works. A set of plans and elevations made before and after these were found in the Society of Antiquaries Library. Coupled with some antiquarian references, these suggest there may have been a south aisle at one stage, possibly demolished by the 16th century. Structural evidence of this was more or less erased by a drastic restoration in 1844 (Ryder 1989).

### *Lanchester, All Saints*

Both an archaeological assessment and some watching briefs during reflooring of the south porch and the erection of a new parish hall have shed further light on this important collegiate church. Its earliest parts are 12th-century but its site – adjacent to a possible Roman road c1km east of the fort of *Longovicium* – hints at earlier origins. A late 13th-century remodelling of the chancel correlates to the granting of collegiate status by Bishop Bek. Another major remodelling took place c1500 when tower and aisles were largely rebuilt. A jetton of this date was found in the footings of the organ chamber, previously thought to be 14th-century. In the porch evidence of stone benches, probably removed in 1845, was found.

### *Norton, St Mary*

The surviving transepts and central tower of this cruciform church of the

11th century are certainly pre-Conquest in style, although with the current uncertainty of the actual date of 'Saxon' towers in the north of England, it is tempting to link its construction with the transfer here of secular clergy from Durham in 1081. The nave was remodelled, and aisles added, at the end of the 12th century, the chancel rebuilt a little later and altered c1496. A series of changes in the 19th century included widening of the aisles in 1823, and their narrowing again, supposedly back to the original foundations, in 1876.

### *Redmarshall, St Cuthbert*

Once again the disentangling of late 18th- and 19th-century changes at this small 12th-century church proved difficult. A combination of structural and documentary evidence shows that the tower, usually thought to be contemporary with the earliest parts of the buildings, is probably a complete rebuild of c1806.

### *Ryton, Holy Cross*

Holy Cross is a church that genuinely seems to be the product of one major building phase in the 13th century, although its site, probably within the bailey of an early earthwork castle, may indicate an earlier foundation. The belfry stage of the tower and its lead spire are a little later, and the aisle walls have been heightened. Evidence of post-medieval changes has been erased by Victorian restorations, and repair and restoration mean that little of the original timber structure of the spire survives.

### *Trimdon, St Mary Magdalene*

On an island site in a large village green, the earliest features of this small church are a 12th-century chancel arch and 'low side' window. Otherwise the architectural features are largely of 1873, although the

fabric is complex and interesting. Oral reports of the discovery of a Roman building nearby hint at earlier origins. A small whitewashed building in a pit village was not the sort of church to arouse antiquarian interest, so little evidence of its pre-restoration condition survives.

### *Auckland, St Helen*

The importance of consulting faculty evidence was underlined at St Helen's by the fact that the 'as existing' drawings accompanying the plans for the 1866 restoration show a single broad arch on each side of the chancel where there are now two-bay arcades. Subsequent writers, who clearly did not consult the faculty papers, saw these arcades as early 13th-century work except for their corbels, which are of 15th-century type. Pevsner interpreted the corbels as 'probably replaced or reworked' (Pevsner & Williamson 1983, 396). Now it seems the corbels alone are genuine; the piers and capitals look convincing, but must have been imported from elsewhere. They were probably introduced, and the original arches reconstructed as pairs of narrower ones, to give structural stability. The remainder of the fabric demonstrates a long and complex history, with a 12th-century aisleless nave being the earliest visible element. Once again some of the latest phases, in the 19th century, are the hardest to unravel.

### *West Boldon, St Nicholas*

On the crest of the Magnesian Limestone escarpment and prominent in the landscape sits a church with a fine stone broach spire – a rarity in the north east – that has always been seen as a 13th-century building. For some reason no previous workers seem to have noticed the megalithic eastern quoins of the nave which, together with its thin side walls and the remains of blocked windows

above the 13th-century arcades, all indicate pre-Conquest fabric. The early nave seems to have been truncated at the west end prior to the construction of the 13th-century spire. The present chancel and its eastern extension probably both fall within the 13th century, as do the nave arcades, although the aisles would seem to have been rebuilt and widened in the 14th or 15th century. The common pattern of medieval openings being replaced by plain sash windows in the 18th and early 19th centuries, followed by a thorough re-gothicisation later in the 19th century, results here in a church that (except in the tower) preserves no medieval windows at all, although the majority of its fabric is ancient.

### Whitburn Parish Church

Though Whitburn church today has no dedication, there is some evidence that it was anciently dedicated to St Andrew. The arcades of c1200 may

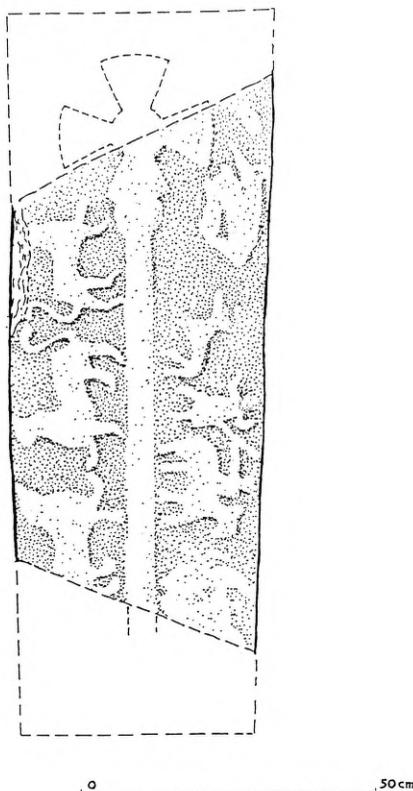


Fig 4 Whitburn: grave slab of c1100 found reused as internal lintel of a small window in the tower (end sections concealed in wall) (P Ryder)

be cut through earlier walls but the wall is unusually thin even for a pre-Conquest building. Fabric changes suggest that the base of the tower is earlier than its surviving features of c1200. While the belfry and spire (which, uniquely in Durham, retains its original timber frame) are later medieval additions. Faculty plans provided valuable evidence of the form of the church prior to its major restoration in 1868, when the aisles were rebuilt and widened. One exciting discovery during the assessment was a grave slab reused as an internal lintel to a small window in the tower (Fig 4). This has a relief design of a cross flanked by motifs which include a series of lions and a horseman challenging a dragon. Lack of local parallels makes dating difficult, but it can be no later than the early 12th century.

### Winston, St Andrew

Winston church demonstrates a developmental pattern quite common in the Tees valley; a humble ?12th-century building, now only visible in the much-patched north wall of the nave, was provided with a refined new chancel in the prosperous years of the 13th century. Later medieval and post-medieval changes have been erased here by an 1846–48 restoration by the Newcastle architect John Dobson.

### Conclusion

With the project still at its mid-way point some overall themes are emerging. As elsewhere, rather more Saxon/overlap fabric survives than had been realised. Sometimes this is so obvious, as with the eastern quoins on the nave at Boldon, that it is hard to believe it has not been spotted before. Elsewhere the evidence may depend more on fabric variations than surviving features (eg Chester le Street), or, where fabric is concealed

by render and plaster, may only be surmised from plan form, as at Gainford.

The accepted interpretations of a number of important later medieval buildings can now be queried, in particular two of the city of Durham parish churches, St Giles and St Oswald. Elsewhere there are cases of extensive reuse of older features within the medieval period. The small 13th-century lancets of the clerestory at Easington, previously seen as one of the first in the district, now look more likely to have been reset from the aisles during a 14th-century remodelling. There was also a major remodelling around 1500 at Lanchester, when earlier features spanning a number of centuries were reset. Here parts of a Romanesque arch, probably from the tower, variously became components of the outer arch of the south porch, its inner doorway and a tomb recess in the south aisle.

Post-medieval features rarely survive in churches of the area. Old illustrations, faculty plans and drawings often provide valuable information on sash windows, galleries and external stairs swept away by 19th-century restoration. Elsewhere structural evidence may indicate major post-medieval works, as at Dalton-le-Dale where a surviving date tablet of 1631 may indicate a partial rebuilding. Many published accounts of Victorian works simply refer to 'the restoration', whereas faculty and other evidence often points to not one but several periods of changes within the 19th century. There is often an 1830s or 1840s phase followed by a second, ecclesiological restoration in the last quarter of the century. Published sources often assume that any feature removed in a late 19th-century restoration (like the chancel arch at Dalton-le-Dale and Romanesque triplet in the east end of Heighington) must have been a genuine medieval piece, whereas it is now clear that

they were of relatively recent date. Elsewhere investigations have shown that parts of a building always described as medieval may be much more recent. The Norman tower at Redmarshall seems to be a complete rebuild, probably of 1806, of a larger and more complex structure described in the county historian Hutchinson's account (1794, 161–62) (which later writers have assumed was an error but is now confirmed by the discovery of a late-18th century painting).

Faculty evidence often, but not always, records late 19th- and 20th-century works (such as the creation of perimeter drains and lowering of floor levels) which directly impinge on the survival of archaeological deposits. However, existing faculties quite often describe (and illustrate) changes that were planned but never carried out. The 1872 drawings by the architects Alexander and Henman of the proposed scheme for the restoration of Norton show a building very much in the Early English style, when in fact the works, apparently carried out in 1876, were executed in a free Perpendicular. Another misleading source here was Pevsner (Pevsner & Williamson 1983, 84), who ascribed

the aisle windows to the early 20th century; an 1892 photograph was traced showing them already in position.

In some churches, recent repair works raise archaeological concern. Refacing and replacement of worn stones at Eggescliffe and on the important 11th-century tower at Norton have apparently been carried out without proper recording. The completion and use of the current survey should help to minimise such damage and will provide a firmer basis for archaeologically-sensitive conservation.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the tea, biscuits and vital nuggets of archaeological information dispensed by so many incumbents and churchwardens, and in particular the enthusiasm and support of DAC secretary Ian Richardson.

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### Note

1. Unpublished drawing by Steve Coll for Dept of Archaeology, University of Durham. Copy lodged with Archaeological Assessment, Durham Diocesan Office.

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