

Saxon Staindrop reconsidered

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Over the last two decades re-examination of medieval churches in north-eastern England has led to the (sometimes tentative) identification of previously unrecognised pre-Conquest structural remains. Such reappraisal has also had the effect of casting doubt on buildings previously identified as of Saxon date. In some cases this results from the redating of features previously accepted as pre-Norman (quite a number of towers previously thought to be late Saxon are now placed in the first half century following the Norman Conquest) but in others it comes from a simple reappraisal of the quoted evidence.

Perhaps the most striking case of this is at St Mary's Church, Staindrop, in Teesdale (Durham), a classic village church enlarged in a number of phases throughout the medieval period. The details of its development have attracted the attention of successive generations of antiquaries and archaeologists. The general outline of its structural history was set out in the 19th century by Lipscomb (1852; 1888) and refined by Hodgson who thought the earliest fabric – the walls of the eastern three bays of the nave which contain the remains of a pair of 'early' windows (above the 12th-century arcades) – was 11th-century work *'which might quite possibly lie on either side of the Conquest border line'* (1889, 81, fnt 10). Since the mid 20th century the structural history of the earliest parts of the church has been re-interpreted by Romans & Radford (1954, 214-16), and their conclusions backed up (and added to) by the Taylors (1965, 564-67) and Pevsner & Williamson (1983).

Romans & Radford wrote a description of the church in connection with a visit by the Royal Archaeological Institute. They described the west wall of the original nave, seen in section on the present north wall, as 2' 4" thick and having a hollow-moulded string course on its outer face. This string and the monolithic heads of the two early windows were compared with features at Monkwearmouth (Durham), and Romans & Radford dated the first nave to the 8th or early 9th century (1954, 214-16). They interpreted the added western bay of the nave and the lower two stages of the tower as an extension of late Saxon date (early 11th century?). They argued that the masonry of these parts must pre-date the late 12th-century arcades *'the old west wall could not have remained standing after the cutting of these openings'*. Romans & Radford also described the blocked doorway high in the west wall of the nave as having detail of *'pre-Conquest type'* and interpreted the eastern quoins of the lower stages of the tower, visible above the aisle roofs, as original, although they thought the western side of the tower had been largely refaced.

The Taylors, in their major work *Anglo Saxon Architecture*, saw the Romans & Radford interpretation as a *'very good critical account'* (1965, 567). They, too, stressed the comparisons between the nave windows and string course with those at Monkwearmouth. Whereas Romans & Radford described a string course seen in section in the cut-away west wall of the nave, 12 feet above the floor, the Taylors described 'hollow-moulded' strings running along the outer faces of the nave walls 22 feet above the floor. They added to the list of pre-Conquest features 'vestiges' of the original quoining of the tower at its western angles. They did query the previous ascription of a Saxon date to the shouldered doorway high in the west wall of the nave, concluding that it, together with the two blocked doorways in the internal face of the west wall of the tower, had no feature that had *'any very definite character which would serve to date it with certainty in the Anglo-Saxon period as distinct from the Norman'*. They thought 'much' of the exterior of the tower had been refaced.

Pevsner & Williamson (1983, 486-87) saw a hollow-chamfered string course on the south face of the south wall of the nave as a feature comparable with Monkwearmouth, but interpreted the proportions of the earliest nave as suggesting a 10th- or 11th-century date. They thought the western bay of the nave and lower parts of the tower were *'later, but still pre-Conquest'* and cited as original features the south-east quoins of the tower, shoulder-headed doorways high in both east and west walls of the tower and the round-headed opening lower down in the west wall of the tower. They also described the stair turret as *'blocking a round-headed window'*.

One would think that the number of features enumerated here makes a convincing case for the survival of Saxon fabric. Examination of each in turn tells a different story.

There is a clear straight joint visible in the nave walls, more or less above the western responds of the three-bay parts of the arcades, but this seems to mark the internal western angles of the first nave, meaning that the earliest section of the arcades could have been inserted whilst the old west wall remained standing. Nowhere is there any clear indication of the line of the external face of this west wall, so how Romans & Radford produced their thickness of 2' 4" is unclear. All that can be correlated with their description of a hollow-chamfered string course seen in section would seem to be what this writer sees as simply a concave break at one corner of a partially-cut away block.

The thickness of the side walls of the nave, measured above the arcade responds, is around 0.88-0.91m and quite typical of Norman work; the Taylors give the wall thickness

as 2' 8" (0.81 m). The two windows that partially survive above the eastern arches of the arcades have monolithic external heads, a form that spanned the Norman Conquest, but their rear arches have up to nine surviving neatly-cut and splayed voussoirs. These have little in common with the early windows at Monkwearmouth which have rear arches made up of only three slabs. The 'hollow-moulded' string courses on the side walls of the nave do not exist. There is no sign of any string on the north, and the only feature on the south which might at first glance be interpreted as one seems in fact to be an old timber wall-plate embedded in the wall, relating to a former roof of the south aisle.

Confusion again arises in evidence for the date of fabric in the west tower. The shouldered arch of the high-level doorway is certainly not of Anglo-Saxon type. Had Romans & Radford ascended to the clock chamber, they would have seen that the rear arches of all the 13th-century windows here are of precisely this form. The supposed refacing of the tower in rubble seems unlikely; the south-east quoins are of the same type as those on the west (and the attached stair turret) and course in with the rubble of the wall and the dressings of the south window of the second stage. The north-east quoins are slightly different in character, but this may be no more than the reuse of one or two older blocks.

The Taylors described two doorways on the west of the tower of which no trace was visible externally. This is not surprising, as they both opened into the adjacent stair turret, inside which they are clearly visible. If they had simply looked outside (or at the plan of the church, which they reproduced) it would have been clear that this section of wall is covered by the stair turret.

The problems at Staindrop do not end with the *in situ* fabric. Several pre-Conquest carved stones have been identified reused in the present building. One stone, reused in the east side of the western buttress on the north side of the north aisle has been mistakenly identified as an Anglo-Saxon piece, initially by Lipscomb (1888, 3) and more recently by Cramp (1984, 145), who saw it as a 9th-century stone bearing a 'true tree scroll'. Although worn, it is in fact a 12th-century cross slab of a common local type, paralleled at nearby St Mary Cockfield (Ryder 1985, 67, 114, pl 13, 51). Hodgson claimed to have found 'unmistakable fragments of interlaced Saxon knot-work . . . worked into the foundation of the easternmost 12th-century pier on the south side of the nave' (1889, 75, fnt 2) but no trace of these can be found. This leaves us with an 'early' sundial now built into the east wall of the nave, high up to the north of the chancel arch.

Apart from the sundial, there is no clear evidence for any Saxon work at Staindrop, either in the standing fabric or in the reused carved stones. The proportions of the early nave are certainly not of the early (7th- or 8th-century) date that has been claimed for them, whilst the wall thicknesses are more Norman than Saxon. The early windows are quite closely paralleled in early Norman work at St Giles, Durham

and St Lawrence Pittington (Durham) and may be of c1100.

Turning to other 'Saxon' churches in the county, the Taylors (1965, II, 726) list 11 Durham churches which they accept as Saxon and two 'possibles.' More recently, St Michael, Heighington has been added to the list on the basis of evidence revealed in a watching brief (Pevsner & Williamson 1983, 65-66, 321; Clack 1986), but the writer remains unconvinced. Of the 11, St Andrew, Aycliffe, St John the Evangelist, Escomb, St Paul, Jarrow, St Peter, Monkwearmouth and probably also All Saints, Sockburn can be accepted with some degree of confidence to be Saxon. Of the others, it has recently been argued by Eric Cambridge (in a lecture to the Architectural & Archaeological Society of Durham & Northumberland c1997) that St Cuthbert, Billingham, or at least its characteristic 'Saxon' tower is really of early 12th-century date, but this remains controversial. St Mary Magdalene, Hart has a complex fabric but may be post-Conquest and it is tempting to relate the Stow-like cruciform St Mary, Norton with a recorded resettlement of secular canons there c1081 (Ryder 1998, 57). St Lawrence, Pittington is clearly early Norman and St Mary, Seaham, with its chamfered plinths and herringbone masonry, looks like an early Norman rebuild reusing four earlier windows. Of the two 'possibles', St Andrew, Haughton-le-Skerne remains uncertain, but SS Mary & Cuthbert, Chester-le-Street is now a little more convincing (Ryder 1997, 37).

Having reduced the list to five or six, one can now add clear Saxon evidence at St Brandon, Brancepeth and St Nicholas, West Boldon (Ryder 1997, 39-40), and possibilities at St Helen, Church Kelloe, St James, Hamsterley and perhaps also the intriguing St Mary, Gainford. More may yet come to light: in the week this article was written an examination of All Saints, Stranton (West Hartlepool) revealed some good megalithic quoining.

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