

St Peter and St Paul, Scrayingham: a previously unrecognised Saxon Church, and Sculptural Fragment

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Scrayingham church, on the east side of the Derwent valley between York and Malton, has been dismissed by architectural historians as a largely Victorian building. It has not been previously recognised that the north wall of the nave, and lower part of its west end, are of pre-Conquest date and perhaps as early as the 8th or 9th century; there are striking parallels with early Northumbrian churches elsewhere in the North East. Part of a carved figure built into the vestry wall has been provisionally identified as of this period, and has affinities to high-quality Mercian sculpture (notably the Lichfield Angel). It seems possible that Scrayingham will prove to be an early monastic site, of considerable significance in the early Christian history of the area.

The village of Scrayingham stands on the east (East Riding) bank of the Derwent, 15 km north-east of York and 5 km north of Stamford Bridge, and its parish church has been largely disregarded by architectural historians. Morris' (1919, 284-5) calls it a 'rebuilt Dec. church'. The first edition of Pevsner

sees it as 'largely of 1853' but admits that the north wall is 'old' and mentions the 14th century north door (1972, 335); the revised and extended 2nd edition identifies the 1853 architect as G.T.Andrews, and in addition makes a cursory mention of 'a blocked Norman window' in the north wall (Pevsner & Neave 1995, 673). The church is listed Grade II: the list description mentions the 14th-century north door as the oldest feature.

Seen from the south (Fig 1), as one approaches from the end of the village street, the church looks very much a Victorian building, but as one walks round the north side much older fabric becomes apparent; the interior, plastered and yellow-washed throughout, is mute as to the earlier history of the building.

The Church

The church consists of a nave 15.5 by 5.2 m internally, with a four-bay south aisle (and south porch), and a

Fig 1

The church from the south, looking like a thoroughly Victorian building – with the Rev Fran Wakefield, who requested the study.

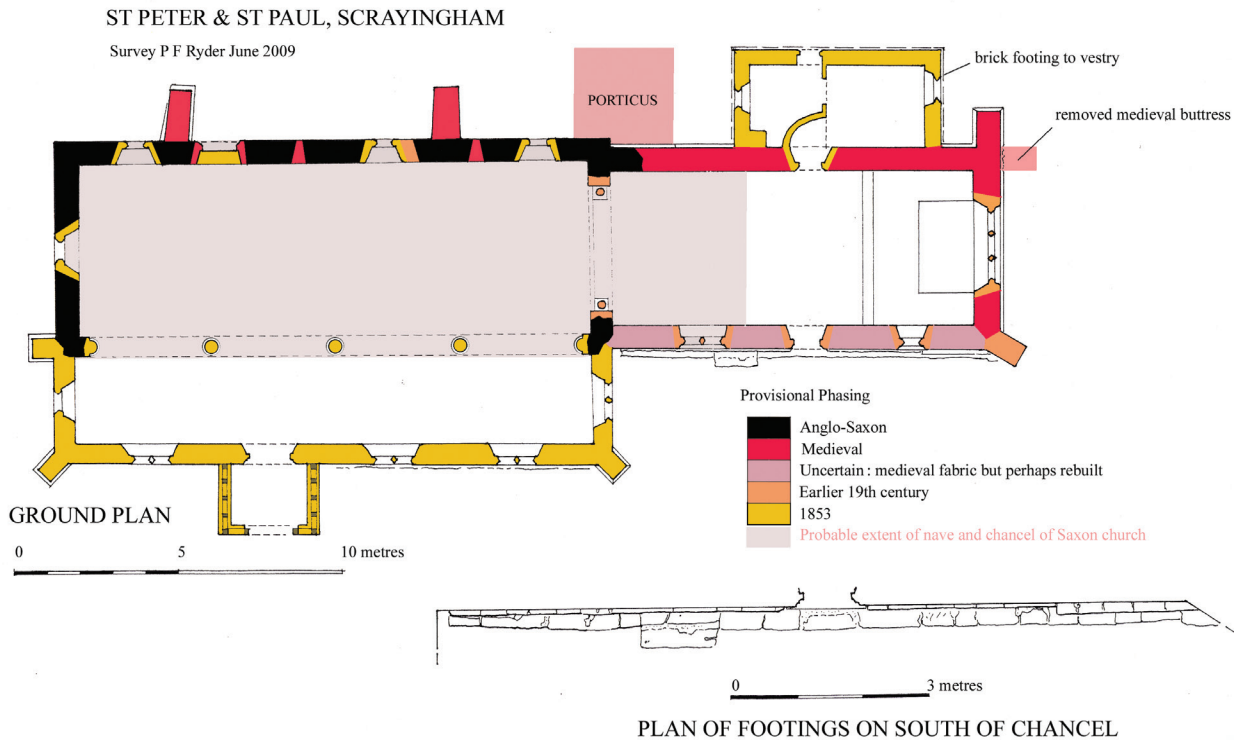


Fig 2
Provisional Phased Plan of the Church.

chancel 10.95m by 4.65m, with a north vestry (Fig 2). Aisle and vestry are of brick, faced in stone externally, and are clearly of the 1853 restoration (the faculty survives). The chancel is medieval, at least in part, although its openings are all 19th century. A variety of carved stones are re-used in its south wall, which may be a 19th-century rebuild using old material; its projecting footings seem to relate to an older structure. The lower part of the east wall and much of the north wall are *in situ* medieval work, as is the buttress – formerly one of a pair – projecting north from the north-east corner. The south and east walls are all Lower Magnesian Limestone, but the lower part of the north wall has larger blocks of a dark and coarse sandstone (presumably Millstone Grit); at its west end a taller area of this fabric shows a clear discontinuity to the better-coursed limestone to the east.

This leaves us with the nave (Figs 3 and 4). The exposed north and west walls are largely of well-coursed big blocks of gritstone, coursing in with the large side-alternate angle quoins; many blocks show sockets and lewis holes, clear evidence of their Roman origin. In the north wall there are three cusped lancets of 1853. The blocked north door is a good 14th-century

example with foliage capitals (now rather eroded). Two big buttresses, of irregular plan, appear to be medieval. There are also two earlier windows, now blocked, set high in the wall (Figs 3 and 4); their spacing suggests that a third might have been removed by the westernmost of the 1853 lancets. Their sills are c.3.2m above the external ground level, and each is c.0.85m high by 0.40m wide; their roughly semicircular heads are cut from three trapezoidal blocks; the jambs of the eastern are formed by single upright blocks, whilst those of the western each have a horizontal block above and a vertical one below. Their character is certainly pre-Conquest rather than Norman, although the fact that their jambs do not relate well to the adjacent walling raises the possibility that they are insertions in still-earlier fabric.

A further significant feature is an old roof line cut into the stonework at the east end of the wall; it descends at a steep angle from a rough socket cut almost at the top of the north-eastern quoin, to a point close to the easternmost of the 1853 lancets. Although the lowest stones of the quoin have been mutilated (possibly indicating that a wall returning north was at one time keyed into them) it would seem more likely

that the roof was that of a structure which extended further to the east, overlapping the junction of nave and chancel. Any evidence of the line of its eastern roof-slope has been lost with the rebuilding of the chancel wall. Similar fabric survives in the lower part of the west wall, but there is a discontinuity *c.* 2 m above ground level, above which the walling, although of similar gritstone blocks, may have been rebuilt; the window and bell-cote above are clearly of 1853.

The extensive re-use of Roman material, the character of the walling, the fact that it is relatively thin (the north wall is *c.* 0.64 m) and the two small windows would all appear convincing evidence for the nave being of Pre-Conquest date. But what date?

It is worth comparing Scrayingham with some of the so-called 'Northumbrian' churches: Jarrow, Monkwearmouth and Escomb in County Durham, Bywell (St Peter) in Northumberland and, in Yorkshire, Ledsham and Conisbrough. They are characterised by narrow and lofty naves, often flanked by smaller chambers or porticus. The proportions of its nave (length/width) are 2.98 – almost identical to Escomb (3.01). The apparent evidence of a chamber overlapping the north-east angle of the nave is paralleled at Escomb and Bywell St Peter (Pocock & Wheeler 1971, 17; Taylor & Taylor 1965, 125). In both these cases access to the chamber/porticus was by a doorway at the west end of the north wall of the

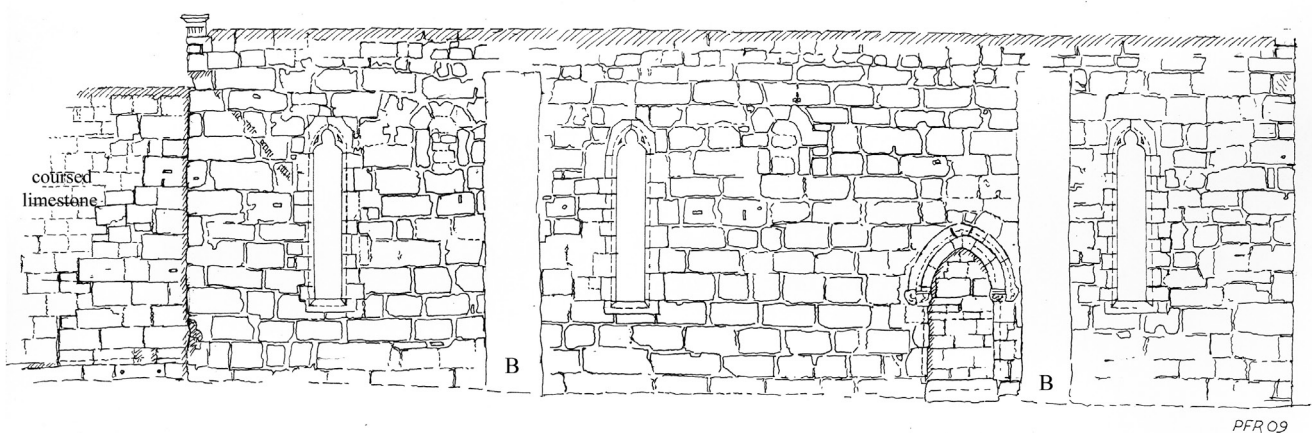
Fig 4

The nave from the north, showing 19th century lancet windows and medieval buttresses.

chancel. There is no sign of such a doorway at Scrayingham, although this could be because the chancel wall has been rebuilt. It has old gritstone masonry, but its chamfered plinth looks of medieval (12th-century?) rather than Pre-Conquest character. However, at Escomb there was a western porticus which seems to have had no direct link with the main body of the church, so such chambers – their function remains uncertain – could have been entered externally.

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Elevation of North Wall of Nave (and part of Chancel)



b: Later medieval buttresses not shown in detail

0 5 metres

Survey by P F Ryder June 2009

Fig 3

Elevation Drawing of the North Wall, showing the two blocked Saxon windows (and the 15th century north door) along with the roof-line of the former north-east porticus and the re-used Roman blocks, some with lewis holes.

The two small windows at Scrayingham are rather different in character from the external openings of those in other 'Northumbrian' churches, which usually have monolithic heads, but rather resemble the rerearches of early windows at Monkwearmouth and Ledsham (Taylor & Taylor 1965, 441, 380). Their proportions would allow for them being double-splayed, usually a late Saxon form of opening, although as already pointed out there is some evidence that they could be insertions in an older wall.

Escomb and Bywell and other Northumbrian churches originally had small and almost square chancels. The exposed footings on the south side of the chancel at Scrayingham chancel are complex and would repay detailed study; however, it is clear that large squared blocks at the west end (quite heavily worn) are different in character from the footing further east, and could well represent an early short chancel.

The Early Sculpture

The evidence of early origins at Scrayingham does not end with the fabric. Pevsner (1972) refers to the collection of sculptural pieces built into the internal walls of the vestry – 'six Norman corbels, a collection of coffin lids with foliated crosses, and two interesting pieces of carving: a piece of clumsy leaf carving and part of a seated figure in relief. Both are probably Norman, though the latter has been re-cut'. The 'clumsy leaf carving' is a fragment with fleshy acanthus leaves and fruit (or a pine cone) and looks as if it could be of the 12th century; if indeed it is an architectural fragment, it would be difficult to place in a small church such as this. The 'seated figure' is especially interesting; the surviving fragment (360 by 225 mm) is the lower left-hand corner of a panel with a flat border within which is the relief-carved elbow, right leg and foot of a robed figure (Fig 5). Derek Craig of the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Sculpture commented 'it looks Anglo-Saxon, and probably early, perhaps late eighth to early ninth century. It seems to be part of a seated figure of Christ in Majesty, quite closely resembling the panel on the Easby cross now in the Victoria and Albert Museum' (pers com). An even more intriguing parallel is with the 'Lichfield Angel' sculpture discovered in 2003 (Rodwell et al 2008); the general

Fig 5
The sculptural panel built into the internal north wall of the vestry.

treatment of the panel, the drapery, and the form of the foot of the Scrayingham fragment all have similarities to the rather-more accomplished Lichfield piece, which is considered to be part of the shrine of St Chad, and to date from the late 8th century.

Discussion

In their magnum opus of 1964, the Taylors identified 19 Yorkshire churches as 'Saxon'; as Morris (192) has shown, many of these may be more properly classed as 'Saxon-Norman' and date from the late 11th or even early 12th century, representing 'the first essays in a new tradition of stone built village churches' (Morris 1988, 192 and 197) rather than survivors of an already long-established building tradition. There are exceptions however, dating from the pre-Viking period; these are

most likely to be monastic foundations, or, as has been suggested for Skipwith, where there is excavated evidence for an early stone church, a high-status archiepiscopal holding (Hall et al, 2008, 441). There is no documentary reference to an early monastery at Scrayingham, but as Wood points out ‘no one would argue that we have anything like a full list of the monasteries founded in 7th and 8th century Northumbria’ (2008, 15); it lies close to a group of perhaps eight (five certain, three possible) early monasteries in the Vale of Pickering, which include Cedd’s foundation of c.654 at Lastingham. The geographical situation of Scrayingham on the banks of the Derwent, the valley of which (together with a nearby Roman road) provides a long-established route north, could argue a function as a staging post on the journey from York to Lastingham (with Hovingham or Stonegrave perhaps forming a second). More locally, the site is a classic one for a Saxon minster or monastery, on a raised spur where a minor tributary joins the main valley. There are a variety of earthworks in the area, including slight features in the churchyard suggesting the former presence of other structures on the same alignment as the church.

Even at this preliminary stage it is clear that Scrayingham Church is an early building of considerable significance; its parallels are with Northumbrian churches recognised as being of pre-Viking date (as opposed to the Saxo-Norman buildings more common south of the Tees) and there is a strong possibility of it being the earliest standing church building in the old East Riding, and a tangible link with the early centuries of Christian history in the area. The presence of a piece of sculpture that has affinities to high-status Mercian work heightens the possibility that this is a site of far greater historical significance than has previously been recognised.

Peter Ryder is a Historic Building Consultant based in Northumberland, with special interests in medieval church architecture and sculpture; he is author of several books including ‘Saxon Churches in South Yorkshire’ (1984), ‘Medieval Churches of West Yorkshire’ (1993) and the ‘Historic Churches of County Durham’ (in press) and several volumes on medieval cross slab grave covers.

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