



Fig 1 All Saints Church Great Ayton from the south

The oldest building in Great Ayton is, by several hundred years, the Church of All Saints (Fig 1). This important Grade 1 Listed building is situated west of the present village centre, a short distance from the Low Green and crucially a few metres above the flood plain of the River Leven. It served as the Parish Church of Great Ayton from its construction in the twelfth century until Christ Church was built in 1876. Not surprisingly, this Norman building has seen many alterations and additions over the centuries. These changes in its fabric and furnishings reflect changes in the social and economic development of the village. Its demise as the Parish Church in Victorian times resulted from population growth linked to the development of various industries.

The Domesday Book records that there was an Anglo Saxon church in 1086, probably on the same site. Many local churches were destroyed in the “Harrying of the North” but the Great Ayton building appears to have survived. Despite this, the invaders wished to make their mark by building a new church in the twelfth century. Using the warm local sandstone they erected what was possibly the only stone building in the village.

Approaching the church from the south, the size and basic framework are much as they were in Norman times. The orientation is west to east with the typical two-cell structure, that is, a larger western nave and a smaller chancel to the east. The lower courses of stone consist of massive square faced blocks, including a wider plinth. The corbel parapet of the nave at roof level with carved weathered faces is also a Norman trait. Surrounding the church is a well used graveyard. The earliest inscription decipherable is for 1699 and the most recent is 1881, shortly before the new cemetery was opened to the north of the old village centre.

An understanding of the main features of this ancient place of worship can be gained through a tour of the exterior, followed by the interior of the building. The various periods of construction can be seen on a plan showing past and present outlines (Fig 2).

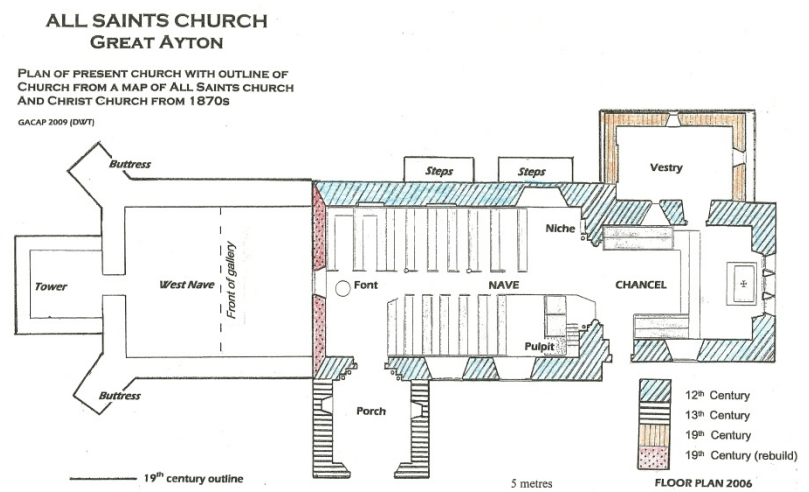


Fig 2 All Saints Church – Plan of present church with outline of western section, demolished 1880

The porch is thought to be a thirteenth century extension, protecting the original Norman entrance. The sundial above the entrance is dated 1743 with a Latin inscription translated as, “I number none but the shining hours”. There are two blocked windows, stone seats and, seen from the outside, the entrance to what is thought to have been a chancel house, where disinterred bones would have been placed when graveyard space was needed for further burials.

The south wall of the nave is largely twelfth century with two large Georgian round-headed windows. The chancel has a priest’s door, thought to be thirteenth century, giving the priest direct access to the hallowed area. The chancel window with its pointed arch is eighteenth century in date. It is however set in a square-headed aperture. The lintel and base for a central stone mullion from the earlier window can be seen. The chancel stonework shows that two courses at the top of the wall are more recent additions, made when the height of the chancel was increased in 1780. At this time the nave and chancel were re-roofed with Westmoreland slate.



Fig 3 Exterior of chancel gable. Grooves probably made by archers sharpening arrow heads

The east end of the church has a decorated triple lancet window, installed in 1880, replacing earlier windows. At the south side of this gable, grooves can be seen incised in the stonework (Fig 3). These were probably cut by archers sharpening their arrowheads when involved in compulsory butts practice near the church. This activity was begun in the reign of Edward I. Ten metres directly east of that corner the Cook family grave is located. The family moved into Great Ayton in 1736 and would have worshipped at All Saints. Captain James Cook's mother and five siblings are buried here. The details are engraved on the front of the headstone, with recent explanations regarding the great navigator on the back of the stone:

*In memory of
Grace Cook who died Feb.18th 1765
aged 63 years
and of James Cook who was buried at Marske
April 1st 1779
The above James and Grace Cook
were the parents of the
celebrated circumnavigator
Captain James Cook
who was born at Marton Oct 27th 1728,
educated in this village
and killed at Owhyhee
Dec 14th 1779*

(There is an error in the date of Cook's death. It should read February not December 1779)

On the north side of the building the vestry can be seen with more recent stonework. (Fig 4). It was added to the chancel in 1849, complete with a fireplace, as the chimney indicates. At ground level whinstone foundations are evident. By this time the whinstone basaltic dyke, which outcrops nearby, was being worked to produce setts such as these.



Fig 4 Exterior of vestry



Fig 5 Exterior of north nave wall. Sealed window and doors

The North wall of the nave shows a complicated pattern of masonry, illustrating changes in the use of the building throughout its history (Fig 5). At the east end there is an almost square blocked-up window, which appears to have been sealed in

two phases. Careful examination of the lintel shows it was designed to have three lights. Its form suggests a fifteenth century date. To the right, at a much higher level, there are two large sealed apertures. The lintel of the first is so high that it has broken into the design of the corbel. Near the west

end of the north wall a carefully sealed arched doorway with horizontal lintel can be seen (Fig 6). For a better understanding of these blocked-up features it is necessary to examine them from the interior.



Fig 6 Exterior of north nave wall. Sealed Norman doorway

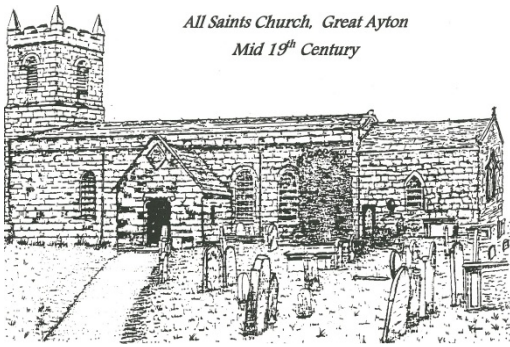


Fig 7 Sketch, All Saints Church mid 19th century

The coursed stonework of the west gable appears much more recent than that of the north nave wall. To understand this it is necessary to examine the plan which includes the outline of the western part of the church prior to 1880. It seems that because of a growing congregation in the fifteenth century the church nave was lengthened and beyond that, a tower added. The tower was replaced in 1788 because of structural problems (Fig 7). This tower and the nave extension were completely removed in 1880. Thus after 500 years the footprint of the church had reverted almost exactly to its original shape. The space previously taken-up by the old building has remained free of graves as

internments were then carried out in the new cemetery. One bell from the demolished tower was fitted into the new west wall. Beneath it is a portion of a grave slab with floriated cross (Fig 8), just one of many examples of recycling over the years. The small pointed window is twentieth century.

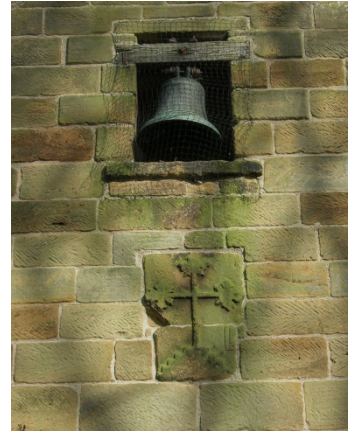


Fig 8 Exterior of west nave gable. Bell and re-cycled gravestone



Fig 9 Norman doorway

Entering the church through the porch, the fine Norman doorway can be seen (Fig 9). It has a semicircular arch of three orders, the outer being carved with the typical chevron ornament. The arch is supported on twin columns. Sharpening grooves, seen in the exterior of the east wall of the chancel, are very common in the porch stonework.

The font, at the back of the nave, is Norman (Fig 10). It has a conical wooden cover. The exposed masonry throughout the interior is much less regular than its counterpart on the exterior. Until the twentieth century it would have been plastered and either white or, in pre-Reformation times, bearing colourful murals. The early roof beams were exposed in 1933. Prior to that, the entire church was barrel-vaulted with a plaster ceiling. The present pews were installed in the mid 1700s. They replaced gated pews which were much higher.



Fig 10 Font, 12th century

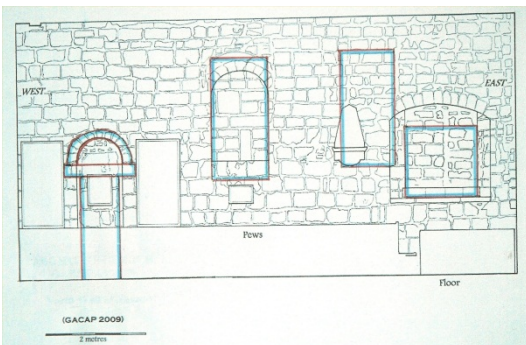


Fig 11 Diagram. North nave wall. Left to right – Sealed "Devil's doorway, sealed doorways, sealed 15th century window

generally referred to as the Devil's Doorway. Its function is said by some to have been to let out the Devil if a child cried during baptism. Others, however, hold the belief that it would have been used for processional purposes.

The north wall carries the scars of 900 years of alterations (Fig 11). Near the west end of the wall the blocked-up Norman doorway with arch (Fig 12) is the same doorway seen on the exterior. It is



Fig 12 Devil's doorway



Fig 13 Remains of gallery support

The arched high-level sealed recess further east was possibly the site of a Norman window. A doorway was however broken through here in 1743 for Thomas Skottowe, Lord of the Manor, and benefactor of James Cook, to access a private gallery above the pews. In this way, the family would not need to enter by the same door as the tenants. The stumps of sawn-off supports for this structure remain at the end of two of the pews (Fig 13). Outside steps, probably wooden, were provided to reach the doorway. In 1821 a second high-level doorway was opened further east for a new gallery for Thomas Graham, then the owner of Ayton Hall. Both of these sealed doorways can be seen from the outside. There was a third, more extensive gallery attached to

the west wall of the extended nave which was used by musicians (Fig 14).

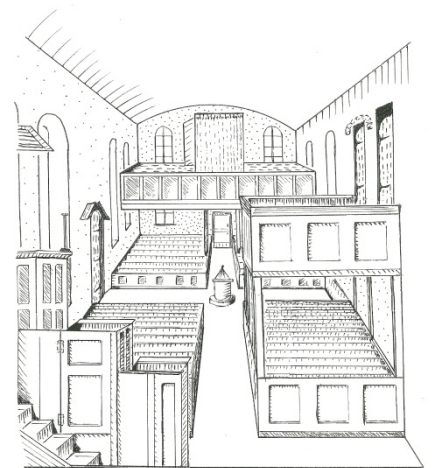


Fig 14 Sketch (conjectural). Nave from chancel, C1850

Written evidence suggests that in pre-Reformation days a small chapel or chantry dedicated to St Mary existed within All Saints. Its location remained a mystery however, until 1915 when major restoration work was undertaken. A sealed-up niche was discovered, plastered over, in the nave on the north side of

the chancel arch. This recess with its trefoil head has been reinstated. A will of 1540 explains that the niche held an image of Our Lady. The remains of such an image was found in the vicarage garden early in the twentieth century and has been placed in the niche (Fig 15). The blocked-up Tudor window at the extreme east of the north nave wall is adjacent to this chapel. It seems likely that this three light window illuminated the shrine. In the recess of this sealed window several sculptured stones of pre-Norman age are housed. There are two of particular note; a cross head of late tenth to early eleventh century (Fig 16) and a cross head in two pieces, also Anglian. These were discovered near the church and have been accepted as proof that the Anglo Saxon church mentioned in the Domesday Book stood on this site.



Fig 15 Pre- Reformation chapel niche, exposed



Fig 16 Pre Norman cross head



Fig 17 Three decker pulpit with sounding board

On the opposite side of the chancel arch stands a three-decker pulpit (Fig 17). This bold feature was added to the furniture in the mid 1700's, comprising, in ascending order, clerk's desk, reading desk and preaching platform. Overhead there is a sounding board. It is interesting to note that even when preaching from the top tier, the curate would be looking up to those in the private gallery!

The break with Rome in 1533/4 had a dramatic effect on the appearance of the interior of All Saints. For centuries there would have been an intricate coloured rood screen masking the lower area of the chancel arch and a loft or beam above this with paintings. Traces of the steps giving access to the loft can still be seen behind the pulpit.

The Norman chancel arch is well seen from within the chancel looking west (Fig 18).

From this situation it is useful to compare the present truncated nave with the pre 1880 view, with the galleries and their access doors and vaulted ceiling. It is fortunate that in the chancel we find the only Norman window of All Saints (Fig 19). Because the vestry was built onto the side of the chancel,



Fig 18 Chancel arch from the east



Fig 19 Norman window, chancel

this window now simply links the two parts of the church. The great thickness of the wall is apparent. Repairs undertaken at various places recently show that the walls were built with two skins of cut stones and rubble was used to fill the space inside. The steeply sloping sill is cut from a gravestone bearing traces of its inscription. Initially, this would be the style of fenestration used throughout the church. Because of the minute apertures, very little daylight got into the building.

The stained glass triple lancet window of 1880 in the east wall and the south wall eighteenth century window with pointed arch admit a pleasing amount of daylight into what must have been a gloomy space. The wooden altar table is Jacobean in appearance. It holds a deep drawer, possibly for storage of church vestments. Normally it is concealed behind the frontal. It may well have replaced a stone altar and, being

wood, was portable as a communion table.

As early as 1866 the vicar of Great Ayton issued an appeal in which he said,
"It is felt that the village is surrounded by scenery so lovely and beautiful, the House of God ought to have a corresponding character, such as becomes its sacred purpose"

He was aware that there were severe structural problems in the old church, especially in the tower and west nave. This, and the growing population, brought him to the belief that a new church building was necessary. In 1876 this came to fruition in the completion of Christ Church, consecrated the following year. In 1880 the tower and western nave of All Saints were demolished. A new west wall was constructed. There followed a period when the old church was neglected and very little used. Fortunately attitudes changed, the decay was halted and the value of the old church was appreciated.

Through the efforts of Christ Church and generations of volunteers, it is once again a "living church", a place of peace and quiet beauty. Weekly services are held in the summer months, mid-week Communion is held and Christenings. Special events take place, such as Carol Services, celebratory services on Capt. Cook's birthday, as well as flower and musical festivals. The church has some 20 voluntary guides. All Saints is still giving a warm welcome to local individuals and groups as well as visitors from overseas, including places which Capt. James Cook knew better than most Aytonians ever will.

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