

# Tyne Valley Saxon Churches Trail

## Corbridge to Ovingham via Bywell

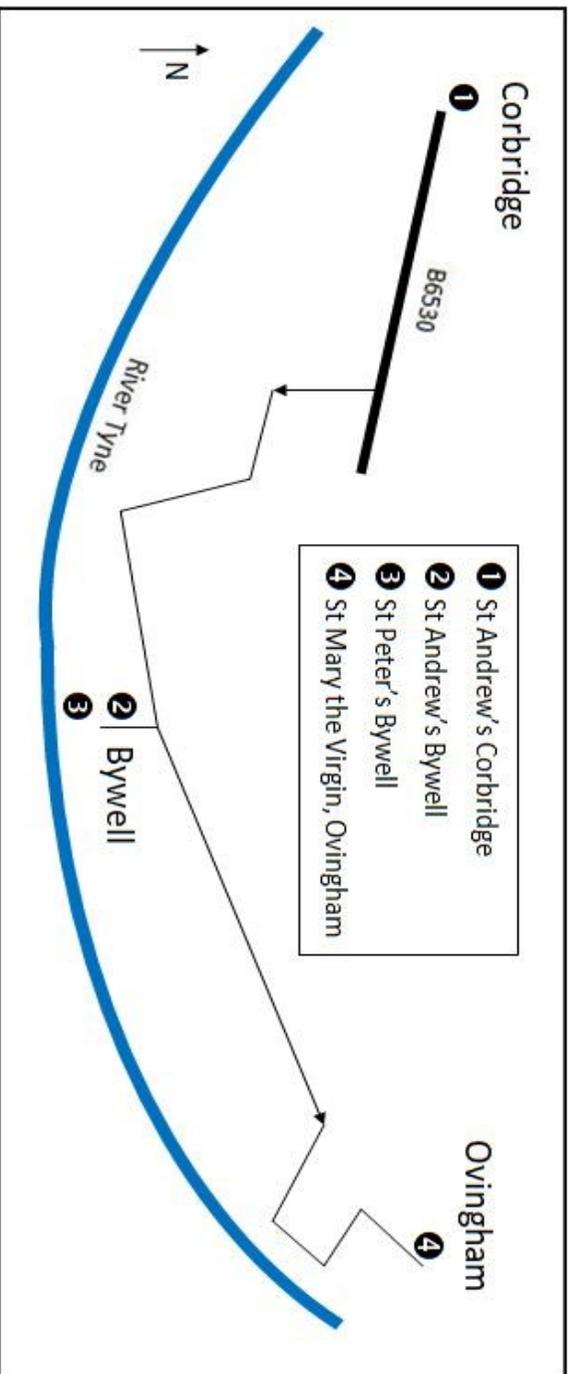


Walk

cycle

or

drive



Compiled by Robert Peers with grateful thanks to Peter Ryder and Dennis Harding 2019

The original idea for this trail came from the Diocese of Newcastle's Pathways Mission weekend September 2018

# Introduction

Welcome! On this trail you will be visiting four very ancient buildings. Apart from Roman remains, these four churches are some of the oldest stone buildings in England. In fact they could be said to be both Roman *and* Saxon! This is because they were first built with stones taken from abandoned Roman buildings and from Hadrian's Wall.

Another thing they have in common is that they were all built during the so-called 'Golden Age of Northumbria' when Christianity was brought to Northumbria - the first kingdom in what was to become England - by monks from Iona. This was a time of great learning and culture (e.g. the Lindisfarne Gospels). Stone monasteries and churches were built, first on the coast—such as at Lindisfarne, Jarrow, Monkwearmouth—and then inland, often following major river valleys.



Picture the scene—the Tyne valley was well-wooded with only the old Roman roads and a few tracks for communication. In some clearings, small family groups of Saxon settlers would have kept animals and grown their own food. Perhaps people still inhabited the vicus (Roman civilian village) at Corstopitum. Into this landscape came missionary monks, preaching and tending to the needs of the peasant population. All churches on this trail appear to have been first built in 7<sup>th</sup> century (exact dating is difficult), some possibly connected to Wilfrid's great project, Hexham Abbey.

Below is a summary of what to see in the four buildings. There follows a more detailed description of features in each church. In addition, Corbridge and Ovingham have their own booklets for sale, whilst the Bywell churches are described in more detail on line (see respective sections for details).

## CORBRIDGE ST ANDREW

You can't understand why Corbridge church is here without thinking about what was here before. The Roman town of Corstopitum (English Heritage) lies just to the west of Corbridge and the line of the Roman Road 'Dere Street' crosses Hadrian's Wall at Portgate, just to the north of Corbridge (at the A68 / B6318 roundabout). This meant that, after Roman government in Britain ended in the early C5, Corbridge continued to be an important place. So when in AD674 Wilfrid was given land at Hexham to build his abbey, there may already have been a wooden church here. Soon after that date a stone church was erected, some parts of which are visible today.



# ROUTE

## Safety

The first mile is on pavements. For half a mile you then walk on the wide grass verge. Walk in single file on this section. After that, the trail follows a quiet minor road (cyclists as well as cars use this road) until near Ovingham from where you use a footpath for a mile.

## Directions

1. Walk east from Corbridge church in the direction of Newcastle, along Middle Street, then past the Angel Inn.
2. After passing the Corbridge Health Centre, there is a short section where the public footpath runs behind a hedge, then continue out of Corbridge until the footpath runs out (at a track to Thornbrough Buildings).
3. Choosing a safe place to cross, now walk on the grass verge on the south side of the road (facing the traffic) for half a mile, passing the old toll house until you come to the junction of the minor road to Bywell.
4. Follow the quiet minor road for 2 miles to the Bywell crossroads, then turn right to visit the two Saxon churches at Bywell.
5. Returning towards Bywell crossroads, there is a path cutting off the corner just past the gates to Bywell castle which brings you to the Ovingham road junction.
6. Take the road which follows the river for a mile and a half until you come to the second road junction to Ovington.
7. Take the public footpath south, which takes you through inter-war holiday cottages then follows the riverbank. This brings you back to the Ovington to Ovingham road near the schools. Follow this road eastwards to Ovingham church.



*East windows, Ovingham church—journey's end.*

The Roman remains were also important as a source of ready-cut stone. This is displayed most spectacularly in the almost complete Roman arch reused on the inside of the tower.

#### BYWELL ST PETER

It is the sheer size of the Saxon foundations, similar in scale to Jarrow and Monkwearmouth (English Heritage), which has led local archaeologist Peter Ryder to consider that this was a monastery church. Whether there was a pre-existing Roman settlement here, as some have suggested, is open to guesswork. However, the choice of site fits a pattern of Northumbrian Anglo-Saxon churches - starting on the coast, then moving up the main valleys. Believing that this was a monastery church also allows us to suggest that St Andrew's Bywell was a *capella extra porta* - literally a church at the gate, built to accommodate local people and pilgrims.

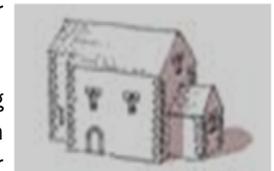
When, in AD 802, Egbert was consecrated Bishop of Lindisfarne here, we can assume that there must already have been a significant building. Why was he consecrated here? We might speculate that, after the first Viking raids on Lindisfarne in AD 793, moving inland provided a safer option! As medieval Bywell village grew in size and importance, so the church was added to and enlarged through the following centuries.



#### BYWELL ST ANDREW

When they were first built in stone, all four buildings on our trail will have looked something like the sketch (see right).

As all have been extensively added to in the intervening centuries, the best idea of what they looked like originally can be seen at the Saxon church at Escomb in Co Durham (near Bishop Auckland), which remains relatively unaltered.



Whilst we might speculate that Roman stones were used in St Peter's church, here we can see what are assumed to be Roman toilet seats finding a use in the tower. This high tower, which Pevsner thought the finest in the North of England, reflects its use partly as defence against raids from the Scots in the early medieval period. The other significant feature here is the large number of medieval grave slabs. Although present in all buildings on the trail, here they are easily examined indoors, as well as those which have been re-used in later building.

## OVINGHAM ST MARY THE VIRGIN

As at Corbridge, Ovingham church lies at the centre of its community and the tower stands out from a distance. The church was probably founded by the family of Saxon chief Offa and built on a settlement dating back to the Bronze Age.

A distinctive feature of Ovingham church is the number of early medieval stone crosses. These are a feature of many parts of Scotland, Ireland and Northern England. Some were erected just outside churches and monasteries; others at sites that may have marked boundaries or crossroads, or preceded churches. Whether they were used as 'preaching crosses' is unclear, and many crosses have been moved to their present locations.



In plan, the building is similar to Corbridge, here with fine east windows. As at St Peter's Bywell, there is much of interest to see in the porch, where fragments of old carved stones are displayed.

## ROUTE

The sketch map on the back of this booklet shows the broad outline of the route. Together with the notes inside the back cover, that map should provide sufficient guidance to follow the trail. The total distance from Corbridge to Ovingham is around 8 miles. Not including time to look round each church, the total walking time should be around three and a half hours.

Saxon porticuses (extensions at right angles to the aisle) which overlapped the junction of nave and chancel, and that the medieval transepts were raised on the footings of their east walls.

Also here are a pair of sedilia (priests' seats) and a recess that contained a piscine (where the vessels would be washed after Mass).

## Ovingham Crosses

Part of a cross shaft dating from the mid 10th to early 11th century sits on the bench against the west wall of the porch. A second, upper part of a cross-shaft also dating from the late 10th to early 11th century, sits underneath the pulpit inside the church. More details can be found in the guide book *Offa's Church* by David Goodacre available in the church.

Another cross-head is situated in 'The Hill' opposite the church, perched high on the banks above the River Tyne. It is now known as 'The Goose Fair Cross' which has its origins in the 13th century when geese were walked from the Carlisle area to markets in the Newcastle and Gateshead area. It then became an annual cattle and livestock market, and later a village fair.



## Ovingham

Ovingham has the common Saxon suffix 'ham' meaning farm or enclosure and is named after the first chief to settle here, Offa.

Thomas Bewick (1753-1828) the renowned illustrator, and his wife are buried in the churchyard. Their gravestones have been relocated into the porch of the church for safekeeping. George Stephenson the famous railway pioneer was baptised in the church in 1781 when Wylam, where he was born, was still part of Ovingham parish.

## Further Reading

*Offa's Church* by David Goodacre

*The Story of Ovingham on Tyne* by Frank Atkinson

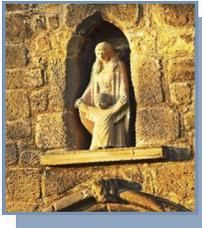
For a full description of the building see Peter Ryder's 2006 report at [www.newcastle.anglican.org/userfiles/file/Newcastle%20Website/Diocesan%20Office/Diocesan%20Advisory%20Committee/Ovingham%2C%20St%20Mary.pdf](http://www.newcastle.anglican.org/userfiles/file/Newcastle%20Website/Diocesan%20Office/Diocesan%20Advisory%20Committee/Ovingham%2C%20St%20Mary.pdf)

Visit [www.stmaryovingham.co.uk](http://www.stmaryovingham.co.uk)

# What to look for at Ovingham church

## Outside the church

1. Fine late Saxon west tower, more massive but plainer than Bywell St Andrew, but again with a high-level doorway on the south.
2. The body of the church is largely good-quality 13th century work, and in plan very like Corbridge. The east end is especially good with stepped lancet windows and chamfered buttresses, very like at Hexham and Brinkburn Priors.
3. There is a ragged break in the fabric between the transepts and their western aisles; were the aisles rebuilt after being destroyed in some raid?
4. Burned stone and foundations seen some years ago indicate that the medieval vestry was on the north of the chancel, and again may have suffered during the troubled later medieval period.
5. The north aisle was rebuilt in 1857; foundations of a slightly-wider predecessor have been seen.
6. As at Corbridge there is a Georgian vestry on the south of the tower.
7. On the side walls of the south porch are Saxon carved fragments and several interesting medieval cross slabs (see *Ovingham Crosses below*). In the porch niche above the door is a 1987 sculpture of the virgin and child.



## Inside the church

8. Inside the 13<sup>th</sup>-century porch, the south door has a semi-circular arch of late Norman character (as at Corbridge this might have been re-set in a later aisle).
9. As at Bywell St Andrew the Saxon tower arch has been altered and re-cut in the 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century.
10. The arcades have some interesting detail. The responds for the transverse arcades on the end walls of the transepts have good 13<sup>th</sup>-century nailhead and dogtooth ornament, but the capital of the easternmost pier of the south arcade has foliage of 14<sup>th</sup>-century form.
11. The chancel arch is, very oddly, set forward to the west of the line of the east wall of the transepts. A possible explanation is that, as at Bywell St Peter, there were

# Corbridge St Andrew

Founded in 7<sup>th</sup> century

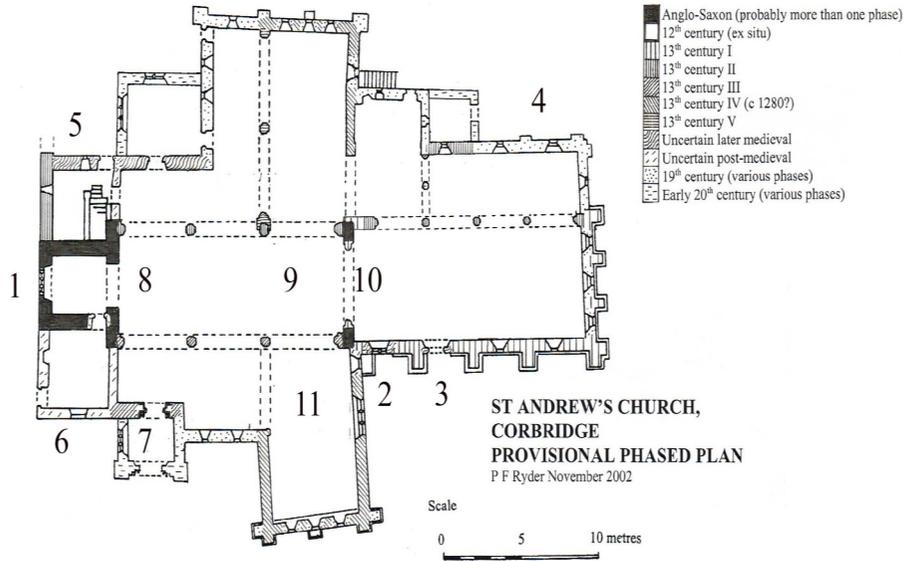
Saxon tower

13<sup>th</sup> century church

Recent windows, door



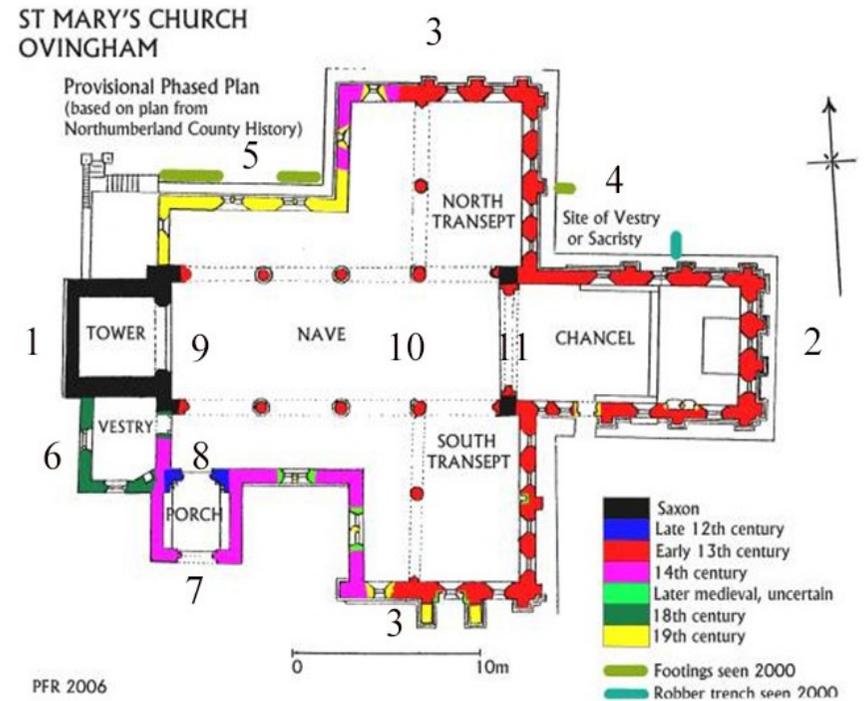
Location of Features Described in Text



Key Dates

- 674 Wilfrid finds monastery at Hexham
- Circa 674 First church constructed using Roman stone
- 786 Adulf made bishop in a "monastery at Corbridge"
- Circa 1050 Saxon tower
- C12 Norman entrance arch
- C13 Major period of construction of present day church
- 1296 Scots sack Corbridge
- 1864 Major restoration begins

Location of Features Described in Text



Key Dates

- C6 Offa's Saxon enclosure
- C7 First church built?
- C10 Late Saxon tower
- C13 Rebuilding by D'Umfravilles
- C14 Augustinian canons from Hexham arrive
- C19 Major restoration
- C21 New ring of 8 bells installed for Millennium

# Ovingham

## St Mary the Virgin

Saxon tower

10<sup>th</sup> century crosses

Fine 13<sup>th</sup> century church

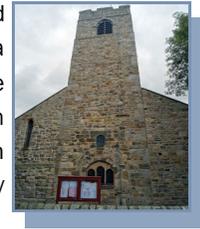
Important graves



## What to look for at Corbridge church

### *Outside the church*

- 1 Lofty west tower, late Saxon raised on an earlier two-storeyed western porch, from which the original west door (now a window) survives. Nave and porch are probably as early as the 8th century. High on the north side is a Roman altar with an eagle, high on the east above the nave roof is a window which originally looked out west from the gable of the extraordinarily lofty nave.
- 2 The south wall of the chancel—much of interest here. The mullioned 'low side' window at the west end of the wall replaces a 13th century buttress, the base of which survives; the buttress also clearly pre-dates the South Transept.
- 3 Trefoil-headed priest's door, probably an insertion. Imagine the priest sprinting from here then across the churchyard to the security of his Tower, if Scottish visitors interrupted a service...
- 4 North aisle to chancel, largely, like much of the outer walls of the church, Victorian restoration replacing parts of the building destroyed in the troubled medieval years.
- 5 At the west end of the north aisle a medieval priest's chamber, on Saxon foundations and superseded by the Vicar's Pele on the south of the churchyard.
- 6 On the south of the tower a Georgian vestry very like that at Ovingham.



### *Inside the church*

- 7 A fine Norman south doorway which was moved when the aisle was added in the 13th century, as doors of this period (having considerable ritual significance) often were. Inside porch is splendid early 20th century recently engraved glass door (see right).
- 8 The arch into the Tower (right) is a re-set Roman piece—an exceptionally rare survival—and is presumed to have come from either Corstopitum or other nearby Roman site.
- 9 The nave arcades are 13th century but above the north one are the heads of two Saxon windows.



The end of the 13th century, before the outbreak of war with Scotland, was a prosperous time and no less than five phases of extension of the church have been recognised. The bulk of the nave dates from this period.

- 10 The early 13th century chancel arch had its lower part widened later in the century.
- 11 There are a considerable number of medieval grave slabs in the transepts and as the lintel of the low-side window.

### The Main Door

The beautiful glass door was given by a local family in 2008 in memory of their mother.



### The King's Oven

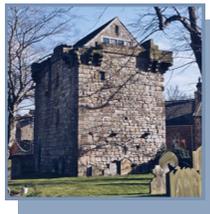


Set in the west wall of the churchyard on Watling Street is the Kings Oven, built around 1300, where villagers baked their meat and bread until about 1710.

### The Vicar's Pele Tower

A pele tower is a small fortified house built along the English and Scottish borders which also served as a watch tower where fires could be lit to warn of approaching danger.

The Corbridge pele is a three-storey tower, with one room to each storey, built in late 14<sup>th</sup> century, and used as the vicarage. It is built largely from sandstone taken from the Roman town at Corstopitum. It was in use as a vicarage until the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The tower was recently re-opened as a pub and events venue.



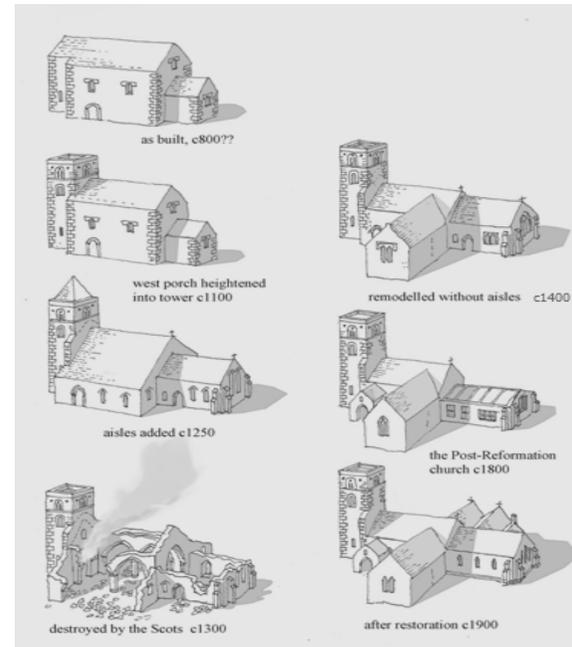
### Further Reading

*A Brief Guide to St Andrew's Parish Church* and *St Andrew's Parish Church Corbridge, Its History and Architecture* are both on sale in the church.

For a full description of the building see [www.newcastle.anglican.org/userfiles/file/Newcastle%20Website/Diocesan%20Office/Diocesan%20Advisory%20Committee/Corbridge%2C%20St%20Andrew.pdf](http://www.newcastle.anglican.org/userfiles/file/Newcastle%20Website/Diocesan%20Office/Diocesan%20Advisory%20Committee/Corbridge%2C%20St%20Andrew.pdf)

After the Norman invasion, the two Saxon churches—St Peter's and St Andrew's—were the property of different families—the Baliols and the Bolbecs respectively. In medieval times, St Peter's became known as the Black Church as it was the base for Benedictine canons (who wore black) invited by the Baliols, whilst St Andrew's became known as the White Church as it was a base for Premonstratensian canons (who wore white) invited by the Bolbecs.

### St Andrew's through the ages



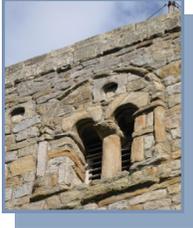
Now in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, St Andrew's was probably built as a *capella extra porta* (a church at the gate) built to allow both local people and pilgrims visiting the monastery on the site of St Peter's to worship without disturbing the monks' routines.

### Further Reading (Bywell)

Visit [www.bmscofe.org.uk/about/heritage/bywell](http://www.bmscofe.org.uk/about/heritage/bywell)

# What to look for at St Andrew's church

## Outside the church

1. The tower is one of the best Anglo-Saxon towers in the North of England, although most experts now think it was built soon after the Norman Conquest. The lower part may be, as at Corbridge, an earlier two-storeyed western porch. Note the mysterious high-level doorway on the south, and distinctive circular sound-holes which may be re-used Roman toilet seats. 
2. Western angles of the nave show typical Saxon megalithic ('big stone') construction; the early nave was taller than that today.
3. In the east side of the South Transept is a change in masonry halfway along, and only the outer half has a chamfered plinth. The older northern part was probably the east wall of an earlier south aisle, perhaps destroyed during a Scots raid.
4. The upper walls of the chancel were rebuilt in 1830 but the lower courses are old. Here the chamfered plinth only starts half way along, suggesting that a short chancel has been extended, probably in 13<sup>th</sup> century.
5. Note medieval cross slab grave covers built into the external walls of 1870 Organ Chamber and North Transept; others were taken inside a few years ago. Lying outside the north door is a 13<sup>th</sup>-century capital which must have belonged to one of the columns of the lost aisle arcades.

## Inside the church

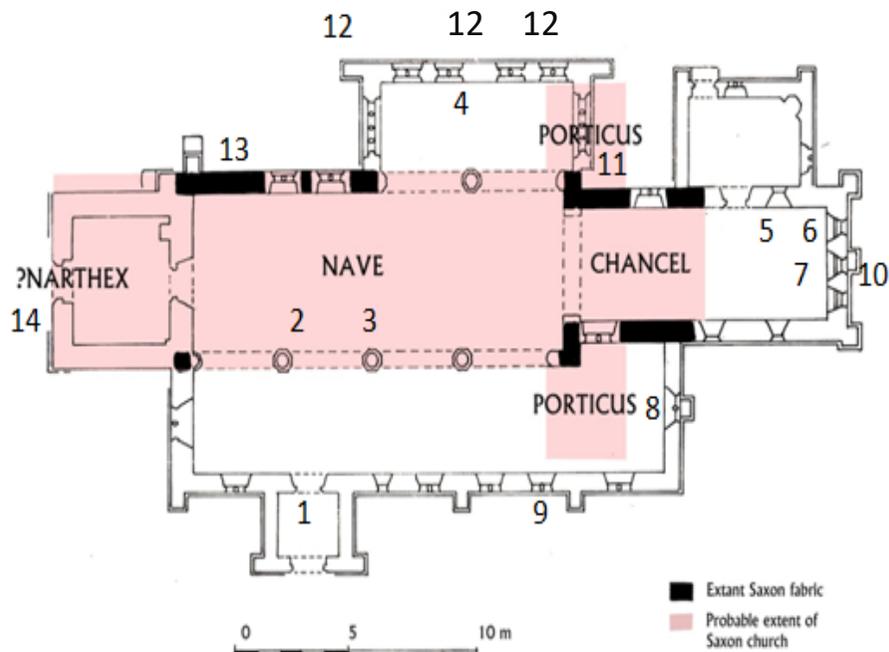
6. The tower arch has Saxon megalithic jambs but the arch has been rebuilt.
7. The inner lintel of the south door is an early cross slab with a pair of shears, emblem of a woman. Others are re-used as lintels of windows in both transepts, along with those re-set in the organ chamber.
8. The arch into the South Transept is a 13<sup>th</sup> century survival from the aisle arcade, the transept itself, which has a piscina, later medieval.
9. Display of more medieval cross slabs—25 in all—in 1871 organ chamber, one with the emblems of a huntsman, another with a ten-armed cross with a shield bearing a lion; can you see the three tiny popinjays (heraldic birds) on the lion? 
10. Part of the shaft of Anglo-Scandinavian cross mounted on a Roman altar.

# Bywell St Peter

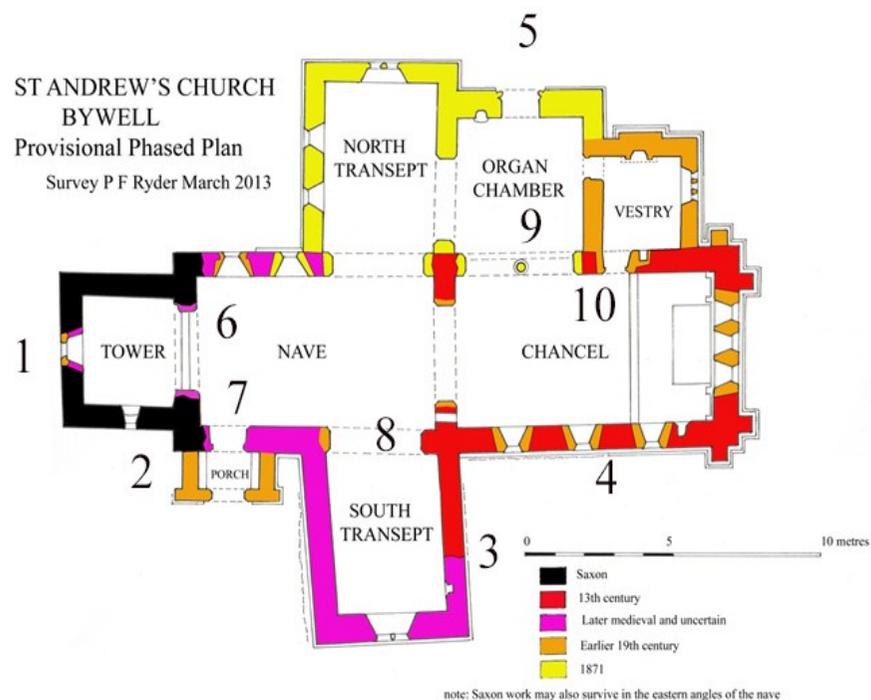
- Saxon monastery
- 14<sup>th</sup> century tower
- Medieval church
- Victorian windows



Location of Features Described in Text



Location of Features Described in Text



Key Dates

- 655 Land bequeathed by King Oswiu?
- C7/8th Construction of monastery church
- 802 Egbert made Bishop of Lindisfarne at Bywell
- C11 Norman lords and monks arrived
- C13 Chancel extended
- 1285 Serious fire (point 11), some rebuilding
- 1310 Tower started for defensive purposes
- C14 North Chapel built by Neville family
- 1849 Major restoration; South aisle rebuilt; vestry; porch; stained glass windows; organ; pews; plastering.

Key Dates

- 655 Land bequeathed by King Oswiu?
- C7/8th Construction of monastery church on the site of St Peter's
- C8? St Andrew's built as a church at the gate
- C11 Norman lords and monks arrived
- C13 Aisles added, then church destroyed by Scots
- C14 Rebuilt without aisles
- C19 Restored and extended
- C19 St James Riding Mill becomes parish church
- C20 Church in care of Churches Conservation Trust

# Bywell St Andrew

Saxon church

Early English extensions

Medieval grave slabs

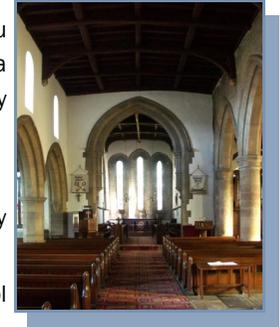
Victorian restoration



## What to look for at St Peter's church

### *Inside the church*

- 1 In the walls of the 19<sup>th</sup> century porch through which you entered, are re-used 12<sup>th</sup> century grave covers and a chevron-marked stone. Other early medieval, possibly Roman stones sit on the bench.
- 2 Medieval font with 19<sup>th</sup> century wooden cover
- 3 High on south wall is a carved head of Edward 1 who may have visited here in 13<sup>th</sup> century
- 4 12<sup>th</sup> century North chapel used later as village school walled off from nave.
- 5 Re-used door to vestry which used to lead from North Chapel into nave.
- 6 Chancel extended early 12<sup>th</sup> century with 3 lancet windows.
- 7 Window on S wall above altar in memory of a curate, who drowned in the Tyne outside the church in 1855.
- 8 12<sup>th</sup> century St John the Baptist side chapel behind organ built on Saxon foundations



### *Outside the church*

- 9 12<sup>th</sup> century Scratch clock in wall (re-used block)
- 10 Memorial to former vicar, Rev Matthew Owen died 24.11.1699
- 11 Saxon stonework displayed at north-east angle of the nave (large, alternating corner blocks known as quoins) and in a blocked up doorway in N wall of chancel. This door led to a former porticus (small extension) - the line of its gabled roof is visible. This doorway was reddened by a fire, possibly during a Viking raid.
- 12 Three springings for arches, never built, either for flying buttresses or some proposed structure to the north.
- 13 Three round-headed Saxon windows set high in north wall of the nave. Some stones reddened by a fire (see 11).  
NB In your mind's eye, remove the lower windows, tower, and North Chapel to recreate the Saxon monastery church, viewed here from the north-west.
- 14 Tower built over W end of Saxon nave for defence; large re-used blocks form foundations; blocked 12<sup>th</sup> century doorway at first floor level; sockets in west door for drawbars.

After the Norman invasion, the two Saxon churches—St Peter's and St Andrew's—were the property of different families—the Baliols and the Bolbecs respectively. In medieval times, St Peter's became known as the Black Church as it was the base for Benedictine canons (who wore black) invited by the Baliols, whilst St Andrew's became known as the White Church as it was a base for Premonastratensian canons (who wore white) invited by the Bolbecs.



### Windows

Many of the Victorian stained glass windows (1881) were made by famous local craftsman William Wailes of Gateshead. Members of his family— who lived at Bearl just up the hill—are commemorated in each of the windows in the north chapel, depicting the apostles.



### Churchyard

18<sup>th</sup> century hearse house; 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century gravestones; church gates made in 1706 originally formed a western entrance from the old village (moved when Bywell Hall was built); snowdrops and aconites January to March; woodland birds in spring and summer.

### Further Reading (St Peter's church)

For a full description of the building, see [www.newcastle.anglican.org/userfiles/file/Newcastle%20Website/Diocesan%20Office/Diocesan%20Advisory%20Committee/Bywell%2C%20St%20Peter.pdf](http://www.newcastle.anglican.org/userfiles/file/Newcastle%20Website/Diocesan%20Office/Diocesan%20Advisory%20Committee/Bywell%2C%20St%20Peter.pdf)



East end, Bywell St Peter's church

## Bywell—a historical landscape

### Bywell Castle

Built by the Neville family in 15<sup>th</sup> century, only the gatehouse was ever completed and it is now a shell in the grounds of Lord Allendale's house.



### Bywell village

Possibly founded in Roman times, probably extant in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Bywell was, for several centuries in medieval times, the most important settlement between Newcastle and Hexham. It lay mainly between the churches, was seriously damaged by the great flood of 1771 and was cleared to make way for the Hall.

### Bywell Hall

Built by James Paine in 1760 for the Fenwick family, with alterations in 1817 by John Dobson, it was purchased by the Beaumont family in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, in whose hands it remains.



### Further Reading (Bywell)

Visit [www.bmscofe.org.uk/about/heritage/bywell](http://www.bmscofe.org.uk/about/heritage/bywell)