**History of St Peter's Church, Bywell**

What is the background to how this church came to be here? The earliest known date associated with the church is 803, when a bishop was consecrated here but that points to an existing building of some status so what happened before that?

As is the case in most of what is now Great Britain, our knowledge of human activity and settlement after the Romans left until Bede's time in C8 is sparse. At the battle of Heavenfield (which in fact took place at Deniseburn, near Steel in Hexhamshire) in 634, King Oswald defeated King Penda of Mercia and established the first Christian kingdom in what later became England. Oswald established the important royal seat at Bamburgh and also the monastery at Lindisfarne where, amongst others, Aidan and Cuthbert were abbots. Although Oswald was later killed by Penda, probably at Oswestry, his brother Oswiu defeated Penda in 655 at the battle of the River Winwaed (Went) at Thorpe Audlin between present-day Pontefract and Doncaster. In grateful thanks for this improbable victory, Oswiu transferred 12 estates from his kingdom to Lindisfarne control, for the establishment of monasteries. According to Ian Wood (quoted in Adams 2013), one of these estates was Bywell. If this supposition is correct, it means that the granting of this land to the church (but not necessarily the building of any structure on it) predates the bequest in 673 of land at Hexham by Queen Etheldreda to Wilfrid, who then established Hexham Abbey.

The foundations of the original Saxon structure slightly overlap the nave of the existing building - an area which suggests a building of great importance.

As its floor space was considerably greater than that suggested by the Saxon remains at St Andrew's church, one can make a reasonable assumption that this was this site, rather than St Andrew's, where a bishop was ordained in 803.   Records tell us that Egbert was consecrated Bishop of Lindisfarne in Bywell by the Bishops of York, Hexham and Candida Casa (Whithorn).

From this documentary evidence, we can make a reasoned supposition that this important building was constructed sometime between 655 and the latter part of the eighth century.  Based on its size and similarities to Monkwearmouth church, the Saxon St Peter's was almost certainly a church serving a monastery.  Where was that monastery?  Probably any archaeological remains (almost certainly of wooden buildings) are under the fields around the church, awaiting discovery!

Of course we must not look at the present church when creating a mind's eye picture of the Saxon church. In Saxon times there was no such thing as a parish and those few stone churches that existed did not have towers (these were often added to existing church buildings by the Normans). As the most complete and unaltered Saxon church in England, Escomb church near Bishop Auckland gives us a glimpse of what St Peter's might have looked like. Although smaller than St Peter's, this view of its northern aspect shows that it shares the high windows and simple design of all Saxon stone churches.

Apart from the foundations which are visible at the foot of the north side of the thirteenth century tower, other Saxon parts of the current St Peter's church include the north nave wall, including the four high windows, the side walls of the western part of the chancel and the blocked door on the northern side of the chancel.  Much of the present building is late 13th century, for example the beautiful lancet windows at the east end. The low side window on the south side of the chancel is a mystery. It is unlikely that this was positioned to give access to the sacrament for those who were sick or highly infectious from the plague. On the south side of the church behind the present day organ, is a thirteenth century side chapel dedicated to St John the Baptist. This contained a large stone altar slab inscribed with five altar crosses. On the north side of the church is a more elegant side chapel with a monumental slab (now concealed under the altar) inscribed with a knight in armour. As the square headed windows of this chapel date from the mid fourteenth century there has been speculation that the knight represents one of the Baliols of that time, in particular either John Baliol or his son Edward.

High on the west wall of the tower is a doorway, subsequently blocked up. Tempting as it is to suggest that this was positioned for reasons of defence, it is more likely to have been a temporary access during construction. The tower contains two very old bells; the one of the 13th century is just over two feet in diameter and stamped with a line of very large Gothic letters. The other of similar size has an inscription in Latin ‘ Ut surgant gentes vocor Horn et cito jac(n)tes’ - ‘I am called Horn and I call the sleeping people to arise’ . These bells have been rung each Sunday morning, except during World War ll. In pre-Reformation times this could have been as early as 5 am for Matins! They may also have been used at times to warn the inhabitants of Bywell about impending danger from border reivers - both English and Scots. Outside on the south wall is a scratch dial clock, possibly early twelfth century and rare in the North Country.

After the Norman Conquest in AD 1066, the lands of Bywell were seized from the previous owners - the Saxon thanes - and given into the possession of two great Norman barons, Baliol and Bolbec. The churches too became properties to transfer from one authority to another. The deal included the tax of a tenth part (a tithe) payable by landowners to support the church. The right of presentation, that is the nomination of a clergyman to a vacant benefice, could also be exercised. Bywell St Peter was in the gift of the Baliols. Subsequently, Bywell successively belonged to the Priory of Tynemouth, the Abbey of St Albans (1197-?) and later to the Bishopric of Durham. Bywell St Peter was called the Black Church because it belonged to the Benedictine or Black canons. This was the Order to which the Tynemouth, Hexham and Durham canons, whose dress was black, also belonged.

After the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536- 40 by order of Henry Vlll, the lands and churches of Bywell passed through several different patrons including Queen Elizabeth l, the Radcliffe, Witham, Thornton, Fenwick and Beaumont families.

Canon Dwarris, Vicar of Bywell St Peter from 1845-1901, was responsible for the restoration and enlargement of the church, which took place between 1848-1870. The chancel arch was rebuilt in its previous form in 1849 under the direction of Benjamin Ferrey who was also responsible for the rebuilding of the south aisle on its old foundations, an organ chamber on the south side in 1870 and new oak seats. There is a fine collection of Victorian stained glass windows (1881) made by the famous local craftsman William Wailes. In particular, the north chapel has a series of windows dedicated to various members of the Wailes family. For more detail about the stained glass windows, please click here.

At about the same time the vicarage, built in the seventeenth century, was also extended. At the entrance to the churchyard are stone piers on which the gates are hung, surmounted by stone ball finials.

St Peter's church is usually open (weather permitting) between the hours of 10 am and 3 pm (until 2 pm in winter). If you would like to visit outside these hours please contact us.

 1The King in the North Max Adams, 2013 Head Zeus. See also In the Land of Giants Max Adams 2015, Head Zeus

For a more detailed history of St Peter's church and information about the other ancient buildings in Bywell, please click here. For ancestry information please visit Northumberland Archives at www.northumberlandarchives.com