

Medieval Fact Sheet

Kirkby Stephen Church



The Parish Church at Kirkby Stephen in Cumbria

Introduction

The existing Church at Kirkby Stephen dates from the thirteenth century with fifteenth century alterations. It is the third church that has been built on this site. The first was built in Anglo-Saxon times; but was replaced in 1170 by a Norman church. This was replaced by the present building in 1240 and has been altered in the centuries since, being partly rebuilt in 1847 and restored in the 1870s. It stands to the north of the Market Place and is sometimes known as the 'Cathedral of the Dales' as it is one of the largest churches in Cumbria.

'Kirkby' is an Anglo-Danish place name meaning a place that is a centre of worship whether or not it has a church. In 1090 the settlement was known as Cherkaby Stephen. Neither the church nor the town are dedicated to St. Stephen and there are three explanations as to where the 'Stephen' comes from. First, it could reflect the fact that Stephen of Whitby was Abbot of St. Mary's at York that owned the parish in the eleventh century; the second is that it is a corruption of 'on the Eden' and the third is that it comes from the Anglo-Saxon word 'stefan' that means a moor.

The market probably grew up around the church during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. A Charter granting a market on Fridays and fairs in April and October was granted in 1351, almost certainly ratifying an existing market. Further market charters were received in 1353 and 1361.

The Church Building

The walls are of local sandstone rubble and ashlar with dressings of the same material; the roofs are covered with slates and lead. Various fragments indicate the existence of a late 12th-century building on the site and the thick west wall of the north aisle is part of this structure. The whole church including chancel, Crossing, Transepts, Nave and Aisles, was re-built about 1230 by monks from St. Mary's Abbey in York. This was an aisled cruciform church as large as the present structure, built of a yellowish sandstone and possibly also with a defensive role. It originally had a central tower that was replaced in the sixteenth century by the present bell tower on the end after the central tower had collapsed for a second time. At some unknown date the north and south chapels were added; the South Aisle was re-built and widened late in the fifteenth century. The thirteenth-century arcades are interesting. Among the fittings the pre-Conquest stones, the monuments and the sedilia are noteworthy.

The Tower is built in the Perpendicular style with eight pinnacles, bell openings of two pairs of tall lights under ogee hoodmoulds, stepped diagonal buttresses, a three light west window and a west doorway with shields in the spandrels. It is generally thought to have been built in 1506 but it has been suggested that the heraldry may be associated with the First Lord Wharton who was active in the 1540s. Inside there is a tall tower arch in a similar style to Shap Abbey. On the masonry of the tower there are various masons' marks.



The Nave

The Nave (31metres with the crossing, by 5.8metres) has early thirteenth-century north and south arcades of six main bays with a narrow bay to the east; the two-centred arches are of two chamfered orders with chamfered labels; the columns are cylindrical and the responds have attached half columns, all with moulded capitals and bases, the latter standing on heavy round chamfered plinths; the lower stones of the columns are larger than those towards the top and may be twelfth-century material re-used. In the northeast respond of the nave there is a recess with a trefoiled ogee head and enriched sill of the fourteenth century.



The North Aisle

The west wall of the North Aisle (2.4metres wide) is probably of the twelfth century below the string-course; the small square west window set high in a wide internal reveal is probably of the fourteenth century. There is the line of a previous steep roof.

The South Aisle is as wide as the transept (6.2metres wide average) and is in the Perpendicular style and has in the south wall four windows with fifteenth-century jambs, heads and labels; the fourteenth or fifteenth-century south doorway has jambs and two-centred arch of two chamfered orders. In the west wall is a window, modern except for part of the label. Above the nave-arcade is a row of old roof-corbels. There are also roof bosses.

The seven bay arcades are complete, but it isn't clear when they were built. They are quick stepping double-chamfered arches on circular piers with octagonal abaci. The water-holding bases are each on an octagonal plinth that stands on larger circular bases. It is thought that these may be the remains of the Norman church or simply evidence of the floor level having been dropped at some time. In the west end of nave there are various capitals of half-cylindrical and angle shafts with foliage and animal-ornament of the late twelfth-century.

The thirteenth-century south arch in the crossing is two-centred and of three orders, the outer plain and the other two chamfered; it has perhaps been re-set; the responds have each two round and one filleted shaft with moulded capitals and modern and partly restored bases.

There is a fifteenth century tomb recess in the north wall of the north aisle with moulded jambs, a segmental-pointed arch in a square head and a moulded label.

The North Transept is relatively complete and retains its clasping buttresses, west wall with sill string and a couple of lancets and its east wall to string level. In the south of the North Transept there is a fourteenth-century altar recess with square jambs and a moulded segmental-pointed arch. In the North wall is a re-set and largely restored 14th-century window of three trefoiled ogee lights in a square head. In the West wall are two lancet-windows, modern externally but partly of the 13th century internally; the southern lancet was re-set to the North of its former position, where it was blocked by the aisle-wall. In the east wall there is a Perpendicular reredos niche.

In the north transept in the altar-recess are moulded semi-octagonal brackets with paterae on face that are probably fifteenth-century. In the north transept east wall there is a square-headed recess, possibly a piscina. The southeast chapel contains a steep early English arch to the transept, hollow moulded like the south doorway on responds with short water-holding bases.

Below the south window in the South Transept is a re-set fourteenth-century doorway with chamfered jambs, a two-centred head and label with carved foliage-stops – hollow moulded with nice foliage tails to the dripmould. In the west wall is a late fifteenth-century arch, segmental-pointed and of two chamfered orders; the responds have each a semi-octagonal shaft with moulded capital and base. The triple south responds of the crossing are also thirteenth century.

The Chancel was rebuilt in the nineteenth century but includes fine steeply trefoil pointed sedilia and piscina. The thirteenth century piscina is in a recess with moulded jambs, trefoiled head and label, Quatre-foiled drain and in a restored foliated projection. The Sedilia is of three bays with moulded trefoiled and gabled heads. There is a thirteenth century Agnus Dei in one gable with shafted jambs and free intermediate shafts, and moulded or foliated capitals. The capitals have awkward upright leaves.

In the churchyard, south of the south chapel, there is a coffin-lid with the remains of a cross and stepped base. It is of the thirteenth or fourteenth-century. There is a Consecration Cross on the east jamb of the south doorway with a small formy cross in a circle.

South of the church in the churchyard, forming a parapet to the area of a house in Market Square, there are fragments of fourteenth or fifteenth-century window-tracery. The window tracery is situated at the entrance to a cellar to the Stone-shot rear north side of 8 Market Street, currently Hall's Newsagents. There used to be another fragment to the other side. It is believed that this masonry was removed from the church during the nineteenth century restoration and was re-used in neighbouring buildings.

In the vicarage garden there is the head of a two-light fifteenth-century window. Incorporated in house south of the church there is a fifteenth-century moulded oak beam.

There is a window in the Local Links building. This was the old Grammar School. There is also a filled section for a window at the northern end of this building. It is possible that two windows came out of the church at some stage and were fitted into old Grammar School.

The North Chapel

The North Chapel contains the empty Wharton tomb. This is a stone coffin or cist placed in the north aisle believed to be medieval that was found in the cellar which is awaiting modern investigation. There are two sections where the church had been previously decorated with paint.

The South Chapel

The south, Hartley or Musgrave chapel is named after two local aristocratic families, the Hartleys and the Musgraves. Several members of the Hartley and Musgrave families have memorials in the chapel.

One of the memorials is to Sir Andrew de Harclay, a humble squire. Harclay was a younger son of Sir Michael de Harcla, Deputy Sheriff of Cumberland, MP for Westmorland and knight with Edward I.

Sir Andrew de Harclay was appointed sheriff of Cumberland in 1311. He distinguished himself in the Scottish Wars, and in 1315 repulsed a siege of Carlisle Castle by Robert the Bruce. Shortly after this, he was taken captive by the Scots, and only released after a substantial ransom had been paid. In 1322, he defeated the rebellious Thomas of Lancaster at the Battle of Boroughbridge on 16th and 17th March. For this he was created Earl of Carlisle.

However, Sir Andrew de Harclay became frustrated with Edward II's inactivity, especially after the defeat at the Battle of Old Byland in October 1322. As Warden of the Marches he was responsible for carrying out peace negotiations with Robert the Bruce on behalf of Edward II and, in January 1323, signed a peace treaty with Robert the Bruce. The act was without royal sanction and the terms of the peace treaty – especially the recognition of Robert the Bruce as King of the Scots - were interpreted by Edward as treasonous. The king issued an arrest order for the earl, and on in February 1323, Harclay was taken into the king's custody in the Great Hall at Carlisle Castle. He was arraigned before royal justices in March, denied a hearing, and executed the same day. He was hanged, drawn and quartered at Harraby in Carlisle, and the various parts of his body displayed in different parts of the country. Only after the fall of Edward II did he get a proper burial at Kirkby Stephen, but the conviction for treason was never annulled.

The Chronicle of Lanercost records that:

“He merited death according to the laws of Kingdoms (but his) good intention may yet have saved him in the sight of God.”

However, there has long been a theory that local rivalry mainly with the de Lacey's played a part in the fall of Sir Andrew de Harclay

Sir Andrew's sister Sarah was only able to find two of his leg bones to be returned and buried in the church.

Sir Andrew Harclay's estates, including Hartley Castle, were given to Ralph Neville to manage and then purchased by Sir Thomas Musgrave whose tomb can be seen in the chapel. Ralph Neville was given the management of the Clifford estates at the same time. Sir Thomas Musgrave was born in 1337 and died in 1376. He built a stone tower at Hartley Castle after receiving a licence to crenellate it in October 1353. He married Sir Andrew de Harclay's sister, Sarah.

The Musgraves were a long-standing Westmorland family that acquired the manors of Crosby Garrett, Great and Little Musgrave, Hartley, Orton, Murton, Sandford and Soulby - all in Westmorland, and South Holme in Yorkshire. Gamel Musgrave is recorded as holding land in Westmorland and Cumberland before the Norman conquest.

There is an early fifteenth century altar tomb with an effigy of Sir Richard Musgrave in the south wall (died 1409). The effigy is of white stone on the altar-tomb with a moulded and enriched slab, each side of which has six niches divided by buttresses, with trefoiled, vaulted, crocketed and finialed heads. There are plain ends to the tomb. The effigy is in plate-armour with a hip-belt, a bare head on bascinet with crest, feet on a lion and a jupon with the arms of Musgrave. There are the remains of a sword with the same arms on the hilt. The Musgrave arms appear on top in a different stone, held by an angel with supporters.



The tomb of Richard Musgrave 1409

Richard Musgrave was born in 1355 at Eden Hall, was knighted in 1377 and married Elizabeth Wollaston in 1378. He succeeded his grandfather on his death in 1385. From 1390 until his death he was a Justice of the Peace for Westmorland. From 1392 to 1393 he was Sheriff of Cumberland. In 1399 he represented Westmorland in Parliament. At one time he was the keeper of the royal castle at Berwick on Tweed. He died at Hartley Castle in 1409.

The tomb of Sir Richard's grandson (born 1398 and died 9th November 1464), also named Sir Richard, can be found under the carved arch near the altar. It is a plain black tomb chest with his arms. It is set in a highly decorated gabled niche with crockets, beasts, a bit of blackletter and traces of colour. The altar-tomb is plain with a moulded slab and the shield-of-arms of Musgrave on the edge of the slab, a recess with a moulded segmental-pointed arch, richly carved and crocketed label - a carving apparently based on that of one of the Anglian cross-shafts. At the ends of the label are crouching beasts, at the west end an angel with a scroll inscribed, and at the apex there is an angel with a shield-of-arms of Musgrave, with a lion and pelican as supporters.



The tomb of Richard Musgrave (1464)

Sir Richard Musgrave was born in 1398 and was knighted in 1418. He was under-sheriff of Westmorland (1423-28) and a Justice of the Peace. He was a retainer of the powerful Neville family that, under Richard Neville, Earl of Salisbury and Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, sided with the Duke of York (the Yorkists) against King Henry VI (the Lancastrians) during the Wars of the Roses. During a period of Yorkist dominance, he was appointed a conservator of the truce with Scotland in 1458 but was proscribed by the Lancastrians in 1459 following their victory at the Battle of Ludford Bridge in 1459. By 1461, the Duke of York had been killed and his stepson, Edward of March, claimed the throne. Sir Richard Musgrave attended the Battle of Towton, the bloodiest battle ever fought on English soil, to fight for Edward of March. The result was a Yorkist victory and Edward of March became King Edward IV. Consequently, Sir Richard Musgrave was reappointed to his offices. It is believed that he killed the last wild boar in England on Wild Boar Fell near Kirkby Stephen. He lived at Hartley Castle near Kirkby Stephen where he was born and where he died. In 1847 his grave was opened, and the tusk of a wild boar found inside it as well as the remains of Sir Andrew de Harclay. The tomb is in a low recess in the north aisle. On the tomb it is written:

“Here lieth Richard Musgrave, knight near to him Elizabeth his wife and Thomas his son and heir who died 9th day of November 1464. May God have mercy on his soul or to those whose soul God be propitious”.

In the south chapel on the east wall is a thirteenth century corbel with moulded brackets, with zig-zag leaf ornament consisting of lanceolate leaves, probably thirteenth-century, re-set. In the south wall there is a medieval round drain in a half-round projection. The chapel screen is partly medieval. There is also a coffin-lid with an ornamental cross on a stepped base, with sword and shield from the early fourteenth century.

The Loki Stone

When the Church was restored in 1870, various carved stones were discovered including one known as the ‘Loki Stone’. This is an Anglo-Danish cross-shaft of the tenth century (recently dated by experts from Denmark) made of pink sandstone that depicts Loki. Loki is a figure in Norse mythology with a status like the gods. It is often said to be the only carving of Loki to have been found in Britain although some believe that Loki is also depicted on the Gosforth cross and on a carving found at Gainford in Durham.



The Loki Stone

The ninth and tenth centuries were the 'Viking age' when many Danes and Norwegians settled in Cumbria alongside the existing Celtic and Northumbrian (English) populations. During this time, they abandoned their 'old religion' and became Christians. Kirkby Stephen is a place-name of Danish origin. It is believed that the first church to be built in Kirkby Stephen was constructed in about 850 – probably preceding the settlement of the area by the Danes and Norwegians. The 'Loki Stone' may therefore be a Christian cross-over piece depicting Loki as the devil with horns.

In Norse mythology Loki is the son of giants and is responsible for fathering Fenrir (a monstrous wolf) and Jörmungandr (the world serpent). He is a trickster and a shape changer. He persuades a blind god, Hoor, to throw a dart made of mistletoe at his brother Baldr that kills him. Hoor and Baldr are both sons of Odin (the chief of the gods). Loki changes his shape to that of a salmon to evade the gods but is captured. He is bound to three stones with the entrails of Narfi, one of his sons and put underground with a serpent placed above him that drips venom. Loki's wife, Sigyn, protects him by collecting the venom in a bowl but when she goes to empty the bowl the venom drips on Loki making him writhe in pain causing earthquakes. However, Loki is destined to break free from his chains at Ragnarok (the ending of the world) to cause havoc for both the gods and men before finally being killed by the gods.

The stone is rectangular and about one metre high. Loki is depicted on the stone with horns and a beard and is bound with chains. He does not look happy. A simple interlaced geometric pattern is carved on the sides and a view of Loki from above is carved on the top.

It is common for Norse gods and other figures to appear in early Christian sculpture. It is often said that this is because many people continued to believe in the 'old gods' despite their official conversion to Christianity. However, others consider that early Christians saw parallels between the Christian and Norse traditions. For example, early Christians may have seen similarities between Loki and Satan – an evil angel who is expelled from heaven.

The 'Loki stone' can be found facing the south door in the church. The other stones that have been found are displayed at the foot of the tower.

Other Early Medieval Stones

The other early medieval stones include two pieces of a late eighth century cross-shaft carved with a large-scale scroll; and two pieces of a tenth century cross or possibly some other furnishing, half columnar in section. There is a tenth century hogback tomb that is undecorated. A Norman capital with leaves has an almost Grecian honeysuckle motif and a square abacus thought to date from the 1170s.



The Hog-Back Gravestone

There are two fragments of a semi-cylindrical shaft with part of one arm of cross-head (60centimetres by 25centimetres by 12centimetres), front with band of interlace flanked by bands of scroll-ornament, flat back with panel of interlacement, probably of the tenth century.

Other stones that survive include:

- Part of a wheel cross-head with interlacement of the tenth century
- Part of plain wheel cross-head, with a round boss in middle, probably of the tenth century
- Part of cross-head with extended arms and linear ornament enclosing a central boss and smaller bosses on the arms, probably of the eighth to ninth century
- A hog-back stone with a gabled top cut to represent tiles and traces of scrolled ornament on sides, probably of the eleventh century. These gravestones were designed to resemble Viking-age longhouses.

Two fragments with foliage ornament, possibly of the eleventh century can be found in the yard of number 33 South Road.

The head of a shaft (about 25centimetres by 22centimetres and 15centimetres high) with a spring of cross-head on top, crude animal forms on one face, interlacement on the back and a late scroll on one side, probably of the late tenth century can be found in the garden of Eden Place, Hartley.

Part of a cross-shaft (21centimetres by 15centimetres and 60centimetres high) with late interlacement on two faces and a form of key-pattern on two sides, probably of early 11th-century date survives.

Kirkby Stephen Church today

Kirkby Stephen is a small town in Cumbria, built on the banks of the River Eden. It is on the A685 between Brough and Tebay. The church is accessed from the Market Place through some cloisters. It is usually open to the public at all reasonable times.

On entering through the south door, the Loki Stone is one of the first things that a visitor will see. The other early medieval stones are in display cases at the foot of the Tower. The Musgrave tombs are in a chapel in the south transept.

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About the Fact Sheets

These fact sheets are written by me (Adrian Waite) unless otherwise stated. Their purpose is to provide basic information and some analysis and comment on medieval historical subjects. They therefore do not provide information about events prior to the fifth century unless this is needed to set events in the medieval period in context and do not cover events after the early sixteenth century. The subjects may be historical buildings, events, people; how medieval history is researched, managed or presented today or other subjects. They are published on the 'AW-History' website and are freely available. I hope that people enjoy reading them and that they encourage readers to explore medieval history further. Feedback about the fact sheets is always welcome and should be addressed to me at adrian.waite@awics.co.uk .

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We welcome visitors and hope that they enjoy the website. Feedback about the website is always welcome and should be addressed to me at adrian.waite@awics.co.uk.
