

March 2022 'Old Churches of Northumberland' - Speaker: Peter Regan

Our speaker gave a stimulating and concise account of "*What makes Northumbrian churches distinctive...*". He revealed some true gems, focussing on the pre Reformation – from the Saxon to the late Mediaeval era. His impressive images illustrated typical architectural styles and sculptured art defining the culture of the time.

Commonalities found in many old Northumbrian churches include the use of local stone, often with the re-use of Roman stone, with striking examples found in Saxon churches along the Tyne Valley at Bolam, Corbridge and Hexham. A very early Saxon church exists at Escomb, Co. Durham, dating from 670 AD. Only three complete Anglo-Saxon churches exist, typically tall and narrow with few windows. Most have seen later additions and reconstruction, such as St Bartholomew's at Whittingham, St Gregory's at Kirknewton and St Mary's on Holy Island. Mostly local architects and builders were used but Norman masons were also commissioned – pre Norman Conquest – leaving their trade-mark arches at entrances and as chancel arches, and sometimes in windows, in many of these historic churches.

Usually these local old churches enjoyed the patronage of ancient Border families, e.g. Percys, Selbys, Greys at Chillingham and Horace St Paul a benefactor of St Mary and St Michael, Doddington. At Doddington the chancel and sanctuary are unusually at the west end of the church and here there is a fine 'Watch House' used for twenty-four hour guard against body-snatchers. Watch-houses are typically found in church yards on main routes, in this case to Edinburgh, as at Belford and Alnwick too.

Square, squat towers are another characteristic (with an exceptionally rare spire at the 13th century church of St Bartholomew at Newbiggin – a good landmark for seafarers). They can be found as fortified Pele Towers, guarding against the then Border warfare. Fine examples include St John's at Edlingham and St Anne's at Ancroft. Many have flat, "invisible", roof tops making it hard to discern a roof at all!

Colder temperatures in these northern latitudes led to chimneys – owing to the need of fires in vestries. External 'bellcotes' (bell towers), with examples at Ford, Chillingham and Bellingham, add another distinctive feature.

Remoteness in this rural county marks another distinction of Northumbrian churches. One such example is St Cuthbert's at Cosenside in Redesdale – it stands in solitary state in a moorland field, west of Elsdon – where once industrial activity supported a thriving community. This treasure, now all but deserted, is one of 20 churches dedicated to St Cuthbert and is said to have been a resting place for his coffin en route to its final resting place; it has a characteristic Norman Arch, and bellcote. Similarly, Chollerton church displays many ancient features including an outside staircase leading to a fortified tower with fireplace and chimney; few gravestones dating before the 1700s exist but one dated 1669, with Latin inscription, is found here. Other sculptured gravestones revealed fascinating art work and symbolism were illustrated.

Additionally, illustrative examples of varying architectural styles were explained, Early English (1180-1275), Decorated (1275- 1380), and Perpendicular (1350-1520), leading to the conclusion that these unique churches of our wider area "*... and why they should be visited*". Our thanks to Peter, who received interesting questions and had a (church) cat amongst his audience!