

All Saints Hovingham

The South Doorway

This plain semi-circular-headed doorway is 12th-century and was carefully built back into the church in 1860.



The Saxon Tower

The tower has stood more or less untouched for over 900 years. It was probably built shortly before the Conquest, perhaps during the reign of the pious Saxon King Edward the Confessor (1042 – 1066) who founded Westminster Abbey. Following his example, ruined churches were rebuilt all over the country. Domesday also informs us that prior to the Conquest, the land at Hovingham was owned by Orm, the son of Gamal, who “bought St. Gregory’s Minster when it was all broken down and fallen, and he let it be made anew from the ground to Christ and St. Gregory, in the days of Edward the King and Tosti the Earl”.

There are several features typical of Saxon building technique:

- i) the tower is built of very rough masonry - probably never intended to be seen, as it would have been plastered and whitewashed
- ii) it is in three “stages”, each separated by a projecting “string course. The large “quoin stones” (corner stones) are built in a local variety of the “long and short” style
- iii) the upper belfry openings are divided by twin arches, each supported by a single shaft curiously set in the middle of the 3’ thick walls. The Saxon tower of the church at Appleton-le-Street, 5 miles down “The Street” is built in similar style in three stages and with similar belfry openings.

The tall lancet window in the second stage has very acute internal and external splays, designed to let in the maximum amount of light from the south. The large window was probably placed in this position as the middle storey of the tower was a dwelling room where the priest lived. It is still a pleasantly lit room with its original plaster on the interior walls and now houses the works of the tower clock.

Several of the quoin stones have been re-used. The lowest stone on the top stage is obviously an upturned door-head and there are at least three other doors or window-heads elsewhere in the tower. These stones must come from the ruined remains of whatever church or churches stood here before the tower was built.

The Wheel Cross

From the earlier church must have come the carved cross, possibly 10th century, which was carefully preserved by the Saxon builders high up over the South belfry opening. It is a “wheel” cross, showing Danish or Scandinavian influence.

The West Doorway

The west door under the tower would have been the only entrance to the Saxon church. The simple semi-circular headed doorway is beautifully preserved; its plain round moulding is carried on shafts of the same diameter. Note that in typical Saxon fashion there is no central keystone to the arch.

Inside the Tower

The ground floor of the tower was re-ordered in 1997-98 by Sir Marcus and Lady Worsley to mark their Ruby Wedding and is used as a meeting room and storeroom. The Charities Board on the wall is a reminder that since earliest times, the Christian Church has always been involved in the relief and education of the poor. The legacies date between 1680 and 1837. Those of 1716 and 1750 refer to the village school. These charities still exist in an amalgamated trust fund.

The lack of a spiral stone staircase in this Saxon tower emphasises the defensive purpose of early church towers. When attacked by marauders, villagers could take refuge up in the tower, pull up the wooden ladder and wait till the marauders passed on.

The irregularity of the masonry on the east wall of the tower is striking, especially the one isolated “herring-bone” course. High up on the right is a small doorway now opening out into space. Its original function is obscure but it may have opened out onto a wooden balcony high up over the nave, and accessible from the priest’s room or more probably, it was the entrance to the priest’s dwelling room, reached by a ladder from the body of the church – the Vicarage front door! The roof of the Saxon Church would have been higher than the present roof.

The Lady Chapel

This chapel was created in 1937 in memory of Sir William Henry Arthington Worsley, who died in the previous year and as depicted in the stained glass window. In the south wall of the Lady Chapel is the Aumbry for the Reserved Sacrament with its perpetual light, presented by Mrs Bowes in memory of her sister Miss E. Burdus, former Headmistress of Hovingham School.

The Sculptured Saxon Stone

The stone set in the wall behind the Holy Table is unique. Until 1924 this stone was built into the masonry of the south side of the tower about 12' above ground level. It was presumably placed there by the original builders of the tower, thus preserving this relic from an earlier church, together with the other crosses already noted. Although now much weathered, the exceptionally fine craftsmanship of the sculptor is still evident. The figures are carved in high relief, with great attention to detail. The figure on the extreme left is an angel. Facing him in the next panel is a figure seated on a trestle stool with a cylindrical cushion seat and a footstool. This is obviously an Annunciation scene – the announcement by the Angel Gabriel to Mary of Jesus' birth (see Luke chapter 1, verses 36-38). The figure on the extreme right is another angel, whose left wing can be clearly seen. He seems to be raising his right arm in a possible blessing or greeting, to the figure in the next panel. However, this figure is so defaced that it is unclear what Biblical scene is depicted. The other four figures are weathered beyond recognition.

The overall design of the stone is however, very clear and is executed with masterful precision. The eight figures are positioned within round-headed panels with each of the outer figures being an angel and facing inwards, suggesting that the subject-matter of the carving has been chosen with an eye to symmetry. Above these panels are seven doves and beneath the figures is a single horizontal panel of entwined vine leaves, upon which are perched some birds. The general style of the panels and the motifs employed indicate strong Romanesque influence. It is intriguing that the sculptor of a stone in a little Yorkshire village should display such artistic style and skill.

The original function of the stone is quite unclear. It may have been a massive lintel over the doorway of an earlier church. It may have been a panel in some significant structure such as

a tomb or altar. One thing is certain: it cannot have had its present function as a reredos; Saxon churches usually had a rounded apse behind the altar, which was free-standing, and the celebrating priest faced his people across the altar.

The Chancel

The whole area of the chancel is devoted to the central altar and its associated furniture. There are no choir stalls and even the clergy reading-desk and matching preaching-stalls stand just outside the chancel arch. As previously mentioned, the entire chancel was re-ordered in this manner in 1981 as a gift from the Worsley family, in memory of the 4th Baronet, Sir William Worsley and his wife Joyce and has created a sense of space.

Previously, the altar had been situated directly under the east window in a rather cramped area and separated from the people by a corridor of long-uninhabited choir stalls. Now, there is convenient space for the celebrant to face the people across the table and for those communicating to gather around the table or at least on two sides. Members of the congregation made the kneelers in front of the President's seat and the motifs in their design include the white rose of York and the crest of the Worsley family.

The 10th-Century Carved Cross

From its wrought-iron pedestal (designed by Ronald Sims and executed by Michael Hammond of Kirbymoorside), the freestanding Viking Cross presides over the whole church, powerfully proclaiming its ancient message to all across ten centuries. For the design carved on the cross does indeed contain a message. The front surface is decorated with two panels. The upper panel consisting of the four arms of the cross, has a design of knotted strap work surrounding a central boss – a pattern typical of 10th-century Viking work. The lower panel consisting of the shaft, depicts two ribbon beasts intertwined in a threefold knot. Their heads and tails are clearly visible in the corners. This design is repeated on the sides of the stone. Its symbolic message is powerful. Many peoples tell legends of huge dragons or serpents (symbolising the powers of evil) which terrorised the land until slain by some hero. The famous Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf (written in the 8th century) is an example. This design thus proclaims the Christian message that the powers of evil have been tied and bound by God the Holy Trinity, as demonstrated in the Cross of Christ.

The Chancel Windows

Within the chancel are two beautiful 13th-century lancet windows which have been preserved in their original position since the restoration of 1860. The glass placed in these windows in 1943 was clear, thus giving a bright atmosphere to the chancel.

The Monuments

The north wall holds several monuments to various members of the Worsley family. Just outside the vestry door is the oldest remaining monument dated 1692 and another similar one dated 1716. Both are in elaborately carved Baroque style. Further on past the organ is an impressive memorial to the grandfather of the Thomas Worsley who built Hovingham Hall. He died in 1715. The monument is an extremely expensive one in the shape of a Roman sarcophagus, faced with various contrasting colours of marble, and bearing the Worsley Arms. It reflects the Age of Reason, deeply influenced by classical ideas, and bearing surprisingly little indication that the deceased was a Christian.

The next monument is a simple and austere memorial to the builder of Hovingham Hall and members of his family, who died between 1770 and 1824. The neighbouring memorial is to Arthington Worsley who died in 1861, a year after his marriage. Note the romantic style of the surrounding floral motifs, and the particular verse of scripture chosen by his wife:

“The Lord watch between me and thee,
When we are absent from each other”

A space was deliberately left for her memorial, which was duly filled in 1893. Note the very different tone of the Latin inscription:

“Requiescant in pace” (May they rest in peace)

which is in keeping with the ‘high church’ atmosphere of this church during this time.

The Organ

The organ is by Messrs Wordsworth & Sons. Originally it was hand-blown, and the handle for the bellows is still beside the vestry door. In the 1880's the "blower" used to be paid £1 a year.

The Stained Glass

The church contains a surprising variety of stained glass, ranging in date from 1860 to 1962 with the oldest glass to be found in the vestry and at the opposite end of the north aisle. The designs consist simply of intertwined foliage and scriptural texts ("God is love") with darker tones dominating. The next group of windows come from the very end of the 19th century with the great east window and the window near the organ. They are both strongly influenced by the Gothic Revival with canopies over the head of each figure – a typical feature of medieval design.

The third group are to be found in the Lady Chapel and are dated from 1913 and 1937. These windows are a good deal brighter than the earlier ones, the effect simply obtained by omitting any canopy or background behind the figures and using clear or light-coloured glass instead. The subjects chosen break new ground also with Yorkshire saints prevailing: Ethelburga, Paulinus, Aidan and Hilda.

The fourth group are modern windows by Harry I. Stammers with the choice of subject reflecting contemporary concerns and are especially influenced by two world wars and the continuing spectre of global disorder. The window on the left of the tower in the south aisle (1950) depicts Christ enthroned as King, the opening scene of John's vision (Revelation chapter 1). The large window opposite the south door (1962) also draws its subject-matter from Revelation. It shows the control of the fearful forces of violence, the horsemen of John's vision being committed to the Lamb, the symbolic description of Christ in John's vision.

These powerful modern windows are contemporary equivalents of the medieval bound snakes on the cross in the Chancel. Though a thousand years apart they both bear witness to the Christian conviction that Jesus is Lord and that at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow.

Information taken from "The Guidebook to All Saints' Church, Hovingham", originally compiled by the Revd Patrick Vaughan in 1974 (4th revised edition, 1999).