

ALL SAINTS' CHURCH, PONTEFRACT

A Survey by The West Yorkshire Archaeology Service April 1993

based on visits in April 1988.

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The old parish church of Pontefract consists (or consisted, as much of the building now lies in ruins) of a four—bay aisled nave with north and south porches, a central tower, a south transept, a north transept with two eastern chapels, and a three-bay chancel with a south aisle and north east vestry. Of the old building the transepts and central tower have been restored and are roofed; a 20th century brick nave occupies the eastern two bays of the old nave (with vestries built into the ruins of the south aisle, linking it to the south porch which remains roofed) and a small polygonal apsed sanctuary projects from the east crossing arch into the ruined chancel.

The medieval parts of the church are largely built of large blocks of sandstone, now badly weathered. Magnesian Limestone is used in some areas, mostly as post—medieval refacing (e.g. in the nave). The south transept and 19th century sanctuary are of tooled yellow sandstone with ashlar dressings; the north transept is largely rendered (with the render scored to simulate coursed masonry).

EXTERIOR

The west end of the nave stands to full height, although the stone is badly worn and bulges in the wall face (particularly at the top of the north west corner) give the impression that collapse is imminent. The wall is of squared sandstone, except for an area at the south end up to the level of the springing of the window head; here the stones are smaller, and more roughly shaped. The wall has a moulded plinth, and a moulded string course at the level of the sill of the great west window. The west doorway, set centrally, has a pointed arch and very worn hollow—chamfered mouldings; the string links to the hollow-chamfered hoodmould. On either side of the doorway are two blocked small openings which seem to have been cut through the wall and later blocked up; they are roughly oval in form, approximately 0.15 by 0.12m. There are similar openings in the west walls of the aisles, south aisle wall inside the south porch, and at eaves level in the south wall of the chancel south chapel; the most obvious interpretation of these, considering the troubled Civil War history of the church, is as gunloops (although they do not splay internally, but maintain the same section). Above the doorway a truncated gable breaks the sill-line of the west window. The window was formerly of seven lights, with panel tracery, in a surround which seems to have had similar mouldings to the doorway beneath, and a hoodmould; the remains of the window head tracery are now fixed against the internal face of the north wall of the north aisle. Above the window a moulded string crosses the wall, carried up in the form of a shallow-pitched gable to clear the head of the window; immediately above this, set centrally, is an opening with two square-headed lights or piercings beneath a flat-pointed arch. The gable above, of relatively shallow pitch, has a moulded coping; the south west corner of the nave is capped by the a small octagonal structure with a doorway onto the roof on the north east, a slit window on the south and a flat slab roof. Apparent breaks in the stonework suggest the outline of a more steeply-pitched gable predating the addition of the clerestorey. The gable end has been flanked by stepped buttresses, but little more than weathered stubs survive of these.

The nave side walls each have a clerestorey of four pairs of windows; each has been of two trefoil-headed lights with a quatrefoil over (only fragments of cusping remain, attached to the outer arches); there is a moulded string at the level of the window sills, and another linking their hoodmoulds; a third string runs below the parapet, which has a moulded coping. Below the sill string a projecting band, chamfered beneath, marks the roof line of the aisles.

The south aisle has a similar plinth to the west end of the nave, and a string course at window sill level. There are remains of a pair of stepped buttresses at the south west corner of the aisle, and a pair of similar buttresses flanking the second bay; only the faintest traces survive of a fifth buttress, to the east of the porch. In the west wall of the aisle is the eroded frame of a former three-light window, moulded with two filleted convex members and a hollow between; there are traces of a hoodmould. The sill of this window appears to cut down through the string course, although this may be a later alteration. In the south wall of the aisle, the south porch projects from the second bay. In the first (westernmost) bay are the remains of a window similar to that in the west wall of the aisle; east of the porch the wall is badly ruined, the only surviving feature being parts of the moulded jambs of the window of the easternmost bay.

The north aisle is generally similar in form to the south aisle, but rather better preserved; its wall stands to full height, although all the window tracery has gone. The windows are of similar form to those on the south, except that the frames have a single broad concave chamfer rather than elaborate mouldings. The stepped buttresses between the bays and at the north west corner are better preserved as well. The north porch projects from the west part of the second bay from the west end.

The south porch, although apparently built up against the two buttresses marking the bay divisions, has its plinth and string-course continuous with those of the aisle wall to either side. At the south angles have been pairs of slender stepped buttresses; those facing east and west have almost disappeared. The outer arch of the porch has quite complex continuous mouldings and a hollow— chamfered hoodmould. The porch has a moulded parapet carried up to a low-pitched gable on the south; the upper parts of its walls look to have been rebuilt or at least refaced.

The north porch is of much shallower projection than that on the south. It has a double-chamfered outer arch; the string course is continued along the side walls of the porch, and then up over the arch as a hoodmould. Above is a second string, and a single—light window lighting a small upper room; this has a pointed head, and remains of a moulded hood with turned—back ends. The porch rises slightly higher than the adjacent aisle wall, and is topped by a moulded coping. Immediately east of the porch the upper part of the north aisle wall is set forward, spanning the angle between porch and aisle; the second string is continued along this portion, which presumably contains some sort of chamber or stair reached from the upper room (see description of interior).

All the external wall faces of the south transept are 19th century refacing, although the evidence of old prints suggests that the architectural features are correct restorations of what was there before. The string-course and plinth (dropping to a lower level) are similar to those of the nave, and there are pairs of stepped buttresses at the angles. The south end has a central doorway with continuous quite elaborate mouldings, and a moulded hood; the string is carried up above the door, to run just below the sill of a large five-light window with panel tracery, and a hoodmould with head stops. High in each side wall of the transept are two two-light windows, each of two cinquefoil-headed lights with trefoil-headed sub-lights over, in a frame with a single broad chamfer; the moulded hoods have head stops. There is a moulded string (carried up over the gable) just below the parapet, which has a moulded coping.

The north transept seems to have been rendered rather than completely refaced; the render is now missing from the upper part of the north gable end (showing squared stone which might be of 19th century date) and has recently been removed from the lower part of the east wall, exposing the outline of an arcade of two pointed arches, now walled up. Apart from these arches, all the visible architectural features of the transept seem to be 19th century restoration. The plinth and buttresses are as on the south transept, but there is no string course. Set centrally in the north wall is a doorway with continuous mouldings, less elaborate than those of the south door; above is a three-light window with panel tracery and a hoodmould with head stops. The side walls each have two high-set two-light windows, as in the south transept.

The walls of the north transept east chapels remain in a ruinous condition. Both east and north walls have a moulded string at window sill level (this is set at a slightly lower level to the string on the adjacent north chancel wall); the string is not continued round the pair of quite broad buttresses, with steep offsets, at the north east corner, suggesting that these are a later addition. Little remains of a buttress set between the two bays on the east. In the north wall, close to its west end, is the frame of a pointed window with a hollow—chamfered surround and a moulded hood; its sill appears to cut down through the string course, although this might be a later modification. The arch of the southern of the two east windows stands, and its frame seems to have been double—chamfered — the sill and wall below have been removed; the northern window is only a gap in the wall, with a little of the south jamb of its frame visible.

The tower is of impressive height. It would appear to have been extensively refaced, both in the late 17th century and in the 1831 restoration. The lower part of the tower is divided into three stages, by a chamfered set-back at the level of the ringing chamber floor, and a moulded string at the level of the sills of the belfry openings. Above the belfry is an oversailing parapet, with an openwork arcade of small pointed arches, and an elaborately carved crocketed pinnacle (restored) at each corner. Within this parapet rises the upper part of the tower, square at its base but with its corners splaying back to form an octagon; the octagonal part has very slender stepped buttresses or pilasters at each angle, and a moulded string below the embattled parapet. Access to the upper parts of the tower is by means of a turret which projects slightly from the north face of the east end of the north nave wall; this has a small pointed doorway to the aisle, and square-headed loop windows. The turret now only rises to the level of the top of the nave wall.

The chamfered set-back below the ringing chamber is broken on the east by a centrally-placed opening with a flattened triangular head, not evident internally. The ringing chamber has chamfered square-headed windows, set off-centre, in the south, east and west walls. The paired belfry openings each consist of two trefoil-headed lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel; below the sills of the individual lights but above the sill of the main opening is a plain panel pierced by a small quatrefoil. A string-course is carried up over the belfry openings as a hoodmould. The octagon has a square-headed window of two trefoil-headed lights, under a hoodmould with turned-back ends, in north, south, east and west faces. On the west face of the tower the lower parts of the belfry openings are obscured by a clockface in an elaborate Gothick surround, flanked by gable-headed panels and capped by crocketed pinnacles; this dates from Chantrell's restoration of 1831.

The east end of the chancel has a two-part moulded plinth (badly worn) of limestone, and is flanked by broad buttresses of relatively shallow projection, that to the north badly ruined. Beneath the sill of the east window is a third shorter buttress of the same type. The head of the east window has fallen; the only surviving parts of its frame are now part of the sill and the south jamb. Externally a straight joint a little south of this jamb may mark the south jamb of the southernmost of a group of lancets preceding the large later medieval window. Beyond this, above the head of the south east buttress, can be seen the springing of what may have been a large relieving arch enclosing the lancets.

The chancel. north wall (its west end covered by the north transept east chapels) has features spaced rather irregularly. The lower part of the east section of the wall was formerly covered by a vestry, the walls of which now remain to a height of approximately 1.2 m. The frames of three windows survive in the wall, all with double—chamfered surrounds and the remains of moulded hoods. The easternmost window is set higher in the wall (to clear the vestry roof) and is rather smaller than the others; it was presumably of two lights. The two larger windows (presumably once of three lights) are set closer together. Beneath them is a moulded string, and beneath that the lower parts of two shallow pilaster buttresses, their spacing quite unrelated to the positions of the present windows. The top 1.5m or so of the wall, and the moulded coping, are obviously an addition, probably post-medieval.

The walls of the south chapel stand to full height, although as elsewhere all the window tracery has virtually gone. On the south there is a moulded string (set at about the level of the plinth of the adjacent transept); the ground falls away slightly, and the string runs at the level of the sills of the chapel windows. There are stepped buttresses between the bays, and a pair at the south west corner. The three south windows have frames with a quite complex moulding of a wave and two hollows; there are remains of moulded hoods. Each window has been of three lights, with remnants of reticulated head tracery still clinging to the arches. The upper section of the wall, as on the north, is obviously a later addition; here rebuilding seems to have taken place after the wall below has been in a ruinous condition; the rebuilt section on this side has a moulded string just below the coped parapet.

The east wall of the chapel has the stringcourse stepped up beneath the sill of its east window, above two low openings (their heads just showing above the present ground level) which presumably give access to vaults. The straight joint between the earlier chancel and the chapel is very clear; the chapel east wall would appear to have been built onto a pilaster buttress at the east end of the chancel south wall. The eroded frame of the east window still stands, and shows it to have had a slightly four-centred arch. The outline of the original gable, before the heightening of the south wall, is quite clear.

As already mentioned, only the lower walls of the Vestry or Sacristy remain; in the centre of the north wall is the lower part of a window opening with double-chamfered jambs.

INTERIOR

The nave has four—bay arcades with pointed arches each of two chamfered orders, with a hollow-chamfered hoodmould to both nave and aisle. The piers are octagonal with moulded capitals; their bases are all buried. The responds follow the section of the arches, and have moulded capitals. The clerestory windows above have hollow-chamfered hoodmoulds linked by a string. Slots cut into piers and respond show that a screen spanned the eastern two arches of the north arcade. The upper part of the west end of the south wall, above the arcade, projects slightly, as if to form a broader base for the small octagonal structure capping the south west corner; Whitehead refers to this as a stair turret - if this is the case, there is now no sign of any door into it below eaves level, although one might well have been concealed by patching and refacing. The west door has a segmental—pointed rear arch.

The south aisle shows remains of a moulded string course at the level of the window sills, and of moulded rear arches to the windows. The south door, within the porch, has continuous mouldings (surprisingly badly decayed if one assumes that the stonework has been protected from the start by the porch) and a hollow-chamfered hoodmould.

The windows of the north aisle have their rear arches moulded with a hollow and a filleted roll, in contrast to their plainer external frames; as on the south there is a moulded string at sill level. The north door has a segmental-pointed rear arch, with above it a slightly-projecting panel of wall containing a ragged hole which presumably originated as a doorway (which must have been reached by a wooden ladder) into the little chamber over the north porch. The shallow porch has a plain pointed vault between inner and outer doorways; the inner door (the north door proper) has continuous mouldings, apparently of quite different profile to the south door). The upper room (not entered) has a vault of the same type as the porch itself, and a doorway on the east perhaps opening into a mural stair rising to the wallhead.

The medieval crossing and transepts now form part of the present church, the interior of which is colour washed. Mouldings etc. have obviously been restored, either in stone or plaster, and it is impossible to tell what is ancient and what is 19th century. The four arches carrying the tower have their inner orders, richly moulded, carried on semi-octagonal responds with elaborate foliage decoration to the capitals; the outer orders are continuous to ground level.

The upper parts of the tower are reached by a stair in the north west turret; internal access to this is by a small pointed doorway at the east end of the north wall of the modern nave. This stair is extremely unusual in that both access doorways (from nave and north aisle) actually give onto separate staircases, which wind around the same newel. At the present top of the turret (which prior to the 1831 alterations rose to the top of the lower part of the tower, apparently as a conventional single spiral) a hinged wooden trapdoor can be swung one way or the other, to allow access from whichever stair is in use. From this point a short section of stair cuts through the wall and opens by a narrow shoulder-headed doorway (which seems old) into the ringing chamber.

The ringing chamber windows all have segmental—pointed rear arches (that on the east damaged). On the north and south two chamfered oversailing courses carry heavy beams alongside the walls, which in turn support the timbers of the floor of the low chamber between ringing chamber and belfry; there is a similar but single course on east and west walls, at a slightly higher level. On both east and west walls two large projecting blocks 1.2m above the ringing chamber floor carry substantial wall posts which rise through the low chamber to support massive beams carrying the belfry floor; from each post a heavy curved brace rises to the beam above, with further diagonal struts rising from the rear of the brace to the upper part of the post face; the wall posts cut through the oversailing course on east and west walls.

The belfry is now reached by a ladder rising from the ringing chamber. There has formerly been a floor at the level of the top of the lower stage of the tower (ie the base of the octagon) but only a few timbers of this survive; its principal N-S support beam is carried on wall—posts (with arched braces) rising from corbels set between the paired belfry openings in north and south walls. Immediately above this floor, squinch arches carry the corners of the octagon. The ladder from the ringing chamber continues up to the surviving section of the floor at the octagon base, from which a precariously-poised second ladder (for those with good heads) gives access to the roof of the octagon.

The transepts each appear to have a blocked two—bay arcade in each side wall. That on the east, of two equal-sized doublechamfered arches (with moulded hoods) springing from an octagonal pier, opened into the former east chapels. The arcade on the west of each transept consists of one broad arch (similar in detail to those opposite) which opened into the nave aisle, and one narrower single—chamfered arch which formed the rear arch of a former window, now blocked; the position of the internal sill of this is clear in the north transept.

The south arcade of the chancel has disappeared, except for its double—chamfered west respond, with a capital which seems to have had some sort of incised design but is now very worn. There was a length of solid wall at the east end of the arcade, as its remaining stub shows both the east end of a recess (perhaps sedilia) and, above that, the inner splay of a window which must pre-date the addition of the south chapel.

At the west end of the chancel. north wall is an arch of two chamfered orders, continuous to ground level, with a moulded hood. This opened into the north transept east chapels. As in the north aisle, the two main windows in the centre part of the wall have richer mouldings internally than externally, and internal hoodmoulds. At the east end of the wall is the bricked-up vestry doorway, with a worn head that seems to have been a four—centred arch, and the easternmost window; this has an apparently unmoulded rear arch rather taller than its external opening, with which it does not seem to 'fit'. The rear arch may survive from a 13th century lancet. Below, at ground level, is the head of a blocked opening, probably to a vault built into the remains of the vestry (within which the present ground surface is over 1m above that outside).

The east end of the chancel is badly ruined. There is a square—headed recess at ground level, just south of the centre of the wall. There are possible remains of a string course at window sill level. Part of the moulded inner south jamb of the late medieval east window survives, with to its south the springings of the arches of both the postulated southern lancet and the enclosing relieving arch (see exterior description).

The south wall of the south chapel retains several features of interest. The three windows all have moulded rear arches and internal hoodmoulds. To the east of the easternmost window is a small recess in the wall (its original form not apparent, perhaps a piscina). Between the western and centre windows are the remains of a tomb recess with a multi—cusped arch, now almost buried by the rise in ground level. The arch has had some form of finial, with relief carving on the wall face above, fragments of which survive. Just above the level of the window heads, and at the base of the later upper section of wall, are a series of six features, evenly spaced, that may have been corbels for roof timbers. The three best preserved take the form of upright slabs of limestone set into the wall; a fourth is a fragment and the other two 'ghosts' in the walling. The south east corner of the tower, which projects slightly into the chapel, adjacent to the west respond of the chancel arcade, carries a filleted roll moulding (cf. north Chancel Chapel).

The north transept east chapels have had moulded rear arches and hoodmoulds to their east windows; the north window has an internal hoodmould. At ground level at the east end of the north wall are the remains of the head of another cusped tomb recess. The south west corner of the south chapel shows a number of interesting features. The north east corner of the tower projects slightly into the chapel space, and is moulded with a filleted roll (a bowtell), interrupted just below the former roof level by a moulded corbel which obviously carried the south end of the roof plate; above this the moulding is continued for one stone on the north face only of the projection. The projection continues up to the level of the present top of the chapel south wall (ie the chancel north wall); there is a slight set-back at the base of the rebuilt upper section of wall, which appears to embody a small buttress on the east wall of the tower, rising from the older wall top level. Above the south respond and centre pier of the blocked transept/chapels arcade are two more corbels, which would seem to have carried wall—posts rising to the roof plate.

The only feature of interest visible from the interior of the vestry is the rear arch of its door, which has a Tudor—arched head, which can be seen to have been cut through an earlier pilaster buttress.

INTERPRETATION

A proper interpretation of the Structural development of All Saints needs to be coupled with a thorough investigation of the available documentary evidence, which would require more time than the present survey allows; in the course of this the surviving mouldings of door and window arches should be properly recorded and compared with examples of known date elsewhere.

Whitehead distinguishes the following building phases:

- (1) Chancel. of earlier church rebuilt soon after 1300
- (2) Transepts with eastern chapels and lower part of tower, probably before 1341.
- (3) Addition of belfry, mid-14th century.
- (4) Rebuilding of nave, with north and south porches.
- (5) Lady Chapel (south chance]. chapel) added, replacing south transept chapels.
- (6) Octagon added to tower towards end of 14th century.
- (7) Nave clerestory added and west end partly rebuilt with great west window and south west stair turret.
- (8) Transept walls raised and upper windows in side walls inserted; new windows in transept gables; new window in north wall north transept north chapel.
- (9) Walls of chance], and Lady Chapel raised, with new east windows to both. Vestry probably added at this time.

(Civil War sieges 1644-5 left the church in ruins and the octagon partly destroyed. The Parliamentarians when they finally captured the building, constructed a 'siege work' within it for their own defence. In 1660 the remains of the octagon collapsed occasioning further damage)

(10) Present octagon built in late 17th century.

(In 1789 St Giles was constituted the parish church)

(11) Transepts and tower restored by R. D. Chantrell, in 1831, as a chapel-of-ease.

(12) West window tracery removed to north aisle in 1906.

(13) New nave (replacing Chantrell,'s porch) and vestry built in 1967 from designs by G.G. Pace.

Following a fairly brief examination of the structure, a few additional comments can be made:

- (a) There are several evidences that the chancel is an early 14th century remodelling of an earlier, presumably 13th century structure. Traces remain of what seem to be lancet windows in all three walls, and the east buttresses seem 13th century. The remains of pilaster buttresses on the north, two 'capped of f' by a later moulded string course and a third cut through by the vestry door, might be of even earlier date.
- (b) A patch of more rubbly masonry in the external face of the west end, crossed by a later string course, might be a remnant of a pre- 14th century nave; the steep angle of the pre-clerestory west gable suggested by slight changes in fabric type and later cracking suggests an earlier medieval date, perhaps 13th century,

The structural and architectural grounds for distinguishing between some of Whitehead's phases are not immediately clear, although their overall pattern is probably accurate.

FITTINGS AND FURNISHINGS

The troubled history of All Saints explains why no ancient fittings or monuments survive. The present font is octagonal, of limestone, and richly carved. Each face bears a quatrefoil panel; two of these have shields with crossed staffs and two shield with crosses fleurée. The other faces have floral designs; there is a band of running foliage below the rim and relief-carved foliage on the lower sloping face of the bowl. The shaft has trefoil-headed panels. In overall form the font closely resembles that at St Giles. The All Saints font at first appears thoroughly 19th century, but closer inspection reveals more chipping and damage than one might expect on a piece of so recent date.

In the transepts are some small late 18th century and 19th century wall tablets.

Eyre Poppleton (1902, 72-6) records six bells by J. Taylor & Co of Loughborough, all dated 1863; he also describes one unusual medieval bell destroyed in 1863 (for this see also an article by Dr J.T. Fowler in *Yorks Archaeol.*, JI. II p. 59).

THE CHURCHYARD

The church now stands in a relatively small triangular churchyard in the apex of the angle formed by the junction of North and South Baileygates; the short west side of the yard is formed by Tanners Row (recently re-aligned, although the churchyard boundary remains unchanged). Excavations in 1985-6 to the north west of the churchyard, beyond Tanners Row, revealed a small Anglo-Saxon church and cemetery. Until 1810 All Saints' churchyard was the principal burial ground in Pontefract; the number of internments was such that the surrounding wall had to be raised in 1786; all monuments have now been cleared away. Within the ruined portions of the church the present ground level is at least 0.6m above the original floors.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

Although the church and its chequered history are relatively well known, there is scope for much further work. The origins of the present church are unknown; the Saxon church revealed in 1985—6 may have been one of a group (possibly on a monastic site), another of which may underlie All Saints. The stratigraphy within the ruins will obviously have been disturbed to some extent by burials, and there are clearly vaults beneath the south chancel chapel and vestry, if not elsewhere as well.

As already mentioned, a detailed structural survey with recordings of mouldings etc. is desirable; the sandstone of which the majority of the building is composed is decaying fast, and there has been considerable deterioration within the last century. A church of this importance would seem to merit a full survey with measured drawings etc. This might help to elucidate details of the medieval development of the building, and would probably also reveal evidences of the church's dramatic involvement in the Civil War actions. Circular loops, such as those above the south door, might be part of the Parliamentarian's fortification of the ruins; the heightening of chancel and south chapel walls might date from the same phase.

Site visits 13 & 14.4.88

J.R. Whitehead, 'Historic Pontefract, No.4 All Saints Church', leaflet produced by Pontefract Civic Trust 1979.