

Brief for the re-ordering of St Gregory's Church Bedale

Background

St Gregory's church is a Grade 1 listed building of Architectural and historical interest and significance. Standing at the North End of the town and visible throughout the town it provides a focus to the curving main street giving a physical and spiritual presence in and to the town. There has been a place of worship on the site since the 9th Century which has undergone several extensions and alterations to create the impressive church now standing. The earliest stone building is thought to have been lost during the harrying of the north ordered by William the conqueror, and sadly little, if any, of that structure remains though the dedication to St Gregory might be indicative of a very early foundation.

Approaching through the churchyard gates the West tower offers both an imposing structure and a sense of refuge and safety, set within the well maintained and extensive churchyard containing a variety of memorials, table tombs, and quiet spaces for reflection. Inside the gate is the Old Grammar School, dated at 1674, now used as the Parish office and the War Memorial that acts as the focal point for the significant Remembrance services held each year.

The church is entered through the Porch to the South of the West Tower, one of the earliest and most significant fortified towers in the North of England. The porch itself has an early stone roof, stone shelf seating and bears witness to the sharpening of arrows for archery practice. Through the door, with housing for large timber bulwarks to prevent attack, is the high stone vaulted ground floor of the tower with a separate tower door retaining the enclosure for early portcullis keeping the tower as a place of refuge for local gentry. To the West of the ground floor of the tower is a significant double entrance door opening housing Oak doors supplied by "mousey" Thomson and exhibiting his trade mark carved mouse. This space is also home to the stone font.

The first floor of the tower consists of a large living quarter, originally domestic accommodation for the sacristan or curate, now the ringing chamber, and above this a further two storeys lead to the clock and bell chambers and separate access to the roof. The ringing chamber contains the original controls of the portcullis, a fireplace, garderobe and stone seats in the window reveal. This window offers an uninterrupted view of the western approach to the church. The tower, said to have been constructed between the battles of Bannockburn (1314) and Neville's Cross (1346), was heightened by the addition of two floors in the fifteenth century. The tower, whilst gothic in detail, begins to exhibit some aspects of renaissance and classical overall design.

The tower houses 9 bells, including the Sanctus dated 1713, the oldest and heaviest of which dates from the 14th Century. Four further bells, originally of similar date, were recast between 1625 and 1660. The three remaining bells

are dated 1755 and 2 from 1873. Also in the tower is a fine three-train flatbed clock by Dents of London dated 1873.

To the East is the Early 13C nave in which the earliest substantial remaining element is the north nave arcade dated at around 1200 having piers differing in design from one another, although all include heavy dog tooth moulding. The North wall contains a simple blocked doorway that was probably moved to this location when the North chapel was added. An inclined stringcourse on the east of the tower indicates the early roofline to the nave and is probably dated at early in the 13C.

The Nave dates from the early 12C with subsequent, late 12c, 13C, 14C, 15C and 19C alterations providing the extended Nave and Choir, fortified tower and two side chapels. The tower, which contains a ring of 8 bells, 3 of which are of listable quality and three more arguably of such quality, was constructed circa 1340.

The South Nave arcade is probably dated around 1300 and gives access onto the later and extended South Aisle and Lady Chapel. This chapel is a bright and airy space having clear glass windows, not least of which is located at the East end and reputedly relocated to this site from Jervaux Abbey (although some historians dispute this attribution)

The North Side Chapel, dedicated to St George, has previously been partitioned to provide both a vestry and choir vestry and to house the organ. This has been achieved using timber partitions and creating vestment cupboards all of which have minimal impact on the stone structure and could be removed in future with limited disruption if so desired. The Vestry is home to the stone effigy of Brian de Thornhill

The church contains a number of Saxon carved stones as well as five exceptional 14C and 15C funerary effigies. Four of these are secular at the west end of the Nave including one of Sir Brian FitzAlan one of the earliest examples in alabaster, and the fifth, located in a recess of the north side of the north chancel chapel, currently the vestry, is of Brian de Thornhill, priest, who died in 1343 having founded a chantry in the town. He is depicted wearing mass vestments and holding a 'pax' as used in the mass. 17C monumental brasses, a fine sedilla in the chancel, a number of mural paintings and a variety of monuments and stained glass windows.

The pulpit is heavily carved, depicting the life of St Gregory, and stands at the North East of the nave before the choir and chancel. Choir stalls, parallel to the nave, extend on either side of the central aisle, are moveable to create a larger concert or stage space, and are provided from the mouseman workshops of Thompson of Kilburn as evidenced by the carved mice adorning the side rails. Below the raised and extended chancel lies the Berresford Pierse crypt or charnel house, dating from the first half of the 14th Century. Access to this crypt is from an external door and there is an internal set of steps into the chancel although these are currently boarded to prevent access. The crypt houses a mediaeval stone altar mensa.

Current Situation

The church serves as a key attraction to and for the town creating a significant footfall to the businesses and other attractions. It will become more significant as the new relief road is completed with its termination about 200m from the church. The Fortified tower of St Gregory's will now be the prime landmark visible to all visitors to the area and will attract further attention to the church.

The current congregation of St Gregory's numbers some 121 individuals of whom around 70 attend principle Sunday services at any one time. There are further midweek, Sunday evening and Sunday morning services that attract smaller congregations. The average age of these congregations is around 70. One Sunday morning each month there is a Book of Common Prayer (BCP) Eucharist, each week the mid week service also follows the liturgy of BCP.

The BCP Eucharistic services are conducted in the Lady Chapel, which also houses the Ambry. And many people use the rear portion of the South Aisle to the rear of the Lady Chapel as preferred seating even when the president uses the main communion table in the chancel.

Three weeks each month the principle services takes the form of Common Worship communion with the fourth Sunday offering a non Eucharistic service directed more towards a younger community. At present this attracts a congregation of around 50 with an average age closer to 50.

The church has been recognised as an ideal venue for concerts and is used by Swaledale festival, Bedale Brass Band, and has been requested for choral societies, other brass bands and performers who consider the size and scope of the building to be more suitable for their genre than the Chantry hall (also owned by the church).

The church has no facilities whatsoever although it has been made accessible, in most areas, with level access through the removal of steps and the introduction of ramps. The pews are all raise 75mm above floor level on timber plinths. The large stone font stands in the centre of the tower entrance obstructing both the principal West door and the most frequently used West porch and door. At some point in the past the North door has been built in.

Future Brief

The church is becoming more active in the wider community, entering into partnership and agreements with local organisations and promoters host an even increasing range of events. In order to facilitate this the church needs:

1. A greater degree of flexibility
2. Improved means of escape
3. Opportunity to offer open spaces
4. Provision of toilet facilities
5. Provision of catering facilities, at the very least hot drinks making
6. Provision for staging
7. Improved storage

8. Enhanced sound re-enforcement and lighting
9. Improved approach, entrance and welcome
10. Extended and improved interpretation of history
11. Opportunity to create performance spaces

As a significant aspect of the mission and ministry of the church it is seeking to offer a wider range of worship styles and experiences, to engage with families and age related groups in new and meaningful ways. We also undertake around 40 church funerals 8 weddings and 25 Baptisms each year. To enable us to more adequately meet the se demands the building needs to provide:

1. Greater flexibility in use of the primary worship spaces
2. Specific space at the heart of the church for children and young families
3. Flexibility for positioning communion table
4. Relocation of Font
5. Lighting to offer range of "moods"
6. Provision of toilet and hot drink facilities
7. Opportunity to use modern electronic devices for projection, sound enhancement etc
8. Voice enhancement /sound re-inforcement
9. Means of visual contact between all areas of church and high communion table
10. Facilities for church shop
11. Improved entrance and welcome
12. Increased storage facility
13. Opportunity to separate smaller chapels for more intimate worship
14. Provision of significant prayer space

It is anticipated that such extensive re-ordering would take place over a series of smaller phases although with the right design it may be possible to achieve all in one. The changes will necessitate a complete review of the heating and electrical installations as well as the lighting and sound systems. It is not essential for the design that the font remains unmoved so an innovative and exciting proposal is looked for.

It is essential that the completed project continues to respect the long history of worship in the church and to recognise the variety of styles of worship that this entails.