St Andrew's Church, Roker

The famous architectural historian, the late Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, described St Andrew's Church as: *'One of the architecturally most interesting and successful churches of its date in England.'*[1] Its weathered appearance, great strength, and Gothic motifs give the impression of antiquity but in fact St Andrew's only dates from 1906-7.

It was designed by Edward Schroeder Prior, probably the greatest English architect of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and was largely paid for by the Sunderland shipbuilder, John Priestman. The church stands amid suburbia on the northern fringe of Roker, a suburb which developed rapidly in the late Victorian and Edwardian era as a popular residential area for members of Sunderland's middle class with the majority of the finest houses constructed around Roker Park, a 17-acre site which dates from 1880 and is situated just to the southeast of St Andrew's.

Before discussing the church it may be profitable to say something about the community it was built to serve, and to briefly discuss the character and achievements of Prior and the church's patron and principal benefactor, Priestman.

In the mid-1850s William Fordyce wrote that *'the north-eastern portion of Monkwearmouth … has been much improved, within the last 20 years, by the erection of the baths at Roker, with an elegant hotel and a handsome row of dwelling houses overlooking the sea to the north of the harbour mouth.'*[2] At this date, and for some time to come, Roker was a little spa geographically and administratively distinct from Sunderland—it became part of the municipal borough in 1867. Sunderland's growing middle class preferred to reside in the Ashbrooke area on the town's southern outskirts. But in the years which followed the founding of Roker Park significant suburban development occurred at Roker, though it never

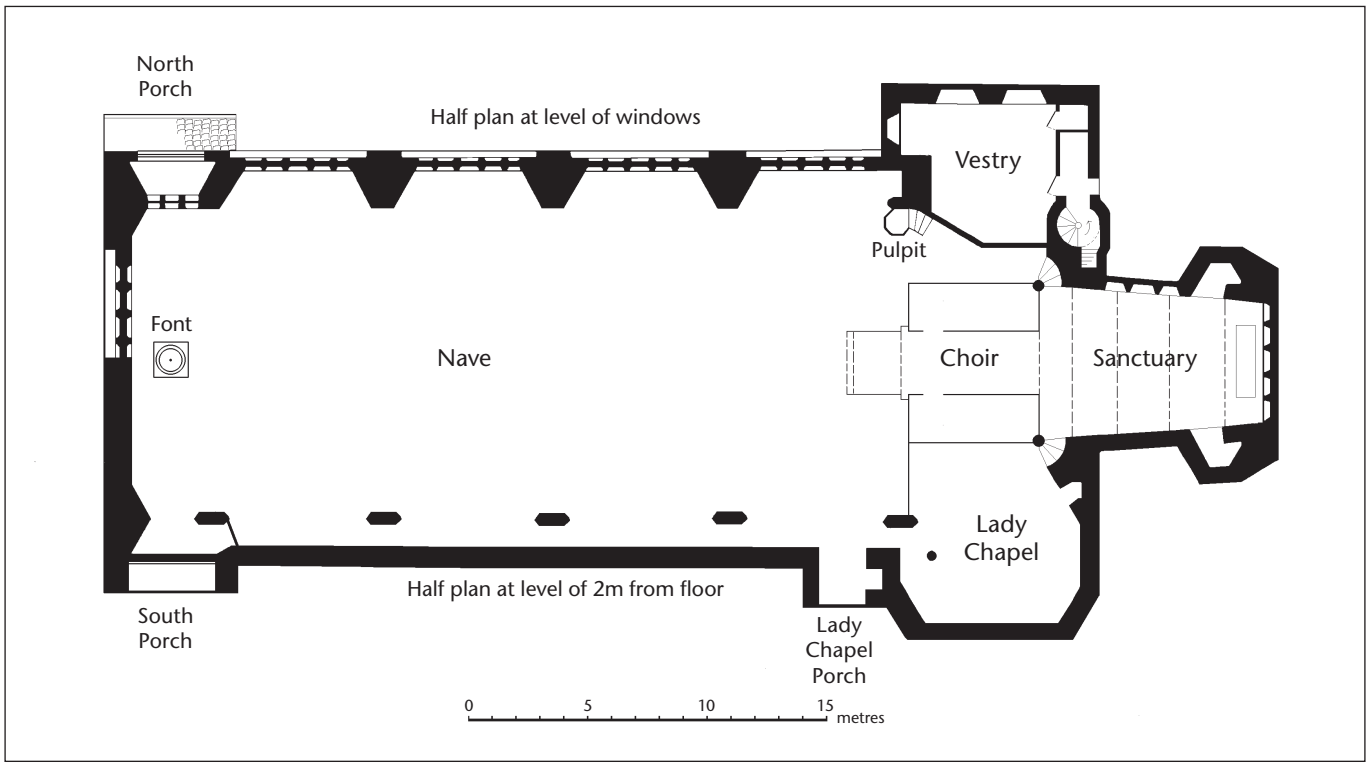
The church viewed from the south west

achieved the same scale as it had in Ashbrooke. A factor which enhanced Roker's appeal as a residential area was the establishment of the Sunderland Tramways Company in 1878 which began a regular service to and from the town centre the following year. In 1904, Roker was described as *'probably the most pleasant part of Sunderland'*,[3] though many of Ashbrooke's residents would no doubt have disagreed.

In the previous year the idea of constructing a church to serve the needs of Roker's Anglicans and those living in neighbouring Fulwell was aired. A public appeal ensued but this failed to raise a sufficient amount of money for the construction of such a building. It was at this point that the Priestman family, particularly in the person of John Priestman, stepped forward and offered financial assistance. They were considering the erection of a memorial to commemorate their late mother, Mrs Jane Priestman, and decided that the construction of a church largely funded by them would be suitable for this purpose. The sum of £6,000 was thus promised on certain conditions. The church was to seat 700 people in the nave, all of whom were to have a clear view of the altar, and the acoustics of the church were to be good so that the organ could be heard well. Moreover, the church was to have a tower which would be a landmark for those at sea.

It is at this point that something should be said about John Priestman. He was born at Bishop Auckland in 1855, the son of a master baker who died while John was young. Priestman soon moved to the boom town of Sunderland to make his way in the world. He entered Blumer's shipyard where he gained a place in the drawing office. He then became the chief draughtsman at Pickersgill's, located a short distance upstream at Southwick, where, at the age of 25, he designed their first iron ship. (Pickersgill's began constructing iron ships rather later than some rival firms on the Wear). Subsequently, in 1882, Priestman opened his own shipyard at Southwick. Though the yard proved successful the bulk of the millions of pounds he accrued in later years came from investments in South African gold mines. Priestman was knighted in 1923 and created a baronet in 1934. He was an active Anglican and a munificent figure—it is estimated that he donated around £500,000 in charitable bequests. Sir John Priestman was twice married. He died in 1941. Of him Bishop Hensley Henson of Durham said, *'his defects were dwarfed by his virtues, the largeness of his nature, and the generosity of his ideals.'*[4]

It has been suggested that Priestman chose Edward Schroeder Prior as the architect for St Andrew's at the instance of Bishop Moule of Durham. Like Priestman, Prior was a man of strong convictions and an individualist. His origins were, however, more exalted for he was the son of a barrister. He was born in London



in 1852 and was educated at Harrow and Caius College, Cambridge. In 1874 Prior entered the office of a celebrated architect, Norman Shaw, who is best known, at least in the North East, for Cragside, a splendid country house near Rothbury in Northumberland which he designed for the Tyneside armaments baron, Lord Armstrong. Of Prior, Shaw commented, *'once he gets a bit of a start, he won't want much help from anyone.'*[5]

Prior's first work was Carr Manor, a suburban mansion in Leeds (1879-82), a project in which he demonstrated a strong attachment for using local materials and techniques, something which is also characteristic of his subsequent work. In this Prior was not alone. A number of other young English architects felt likewise, having been inspired by the ideas of a few older men, most notably the designer William Morris and the architect Philip Webb. Among them was William Lethaby who had joined Shaw's office in 1879, the year Prior left to begin his own practice. Lethaby was to become the dominant theorist and spokesman of the architects belonging to the Arts and Crafts Movement which began to flourish in the 1880s. Although generally individualistic, architects belonging to the movement shared a number of ideals. One such, a desire to use local materials and techniques, has already been referred to. Simplicity was another key-note of the movement, as was a desire to create an original type of architecture in which tradition and originality were blended and in which buildings had an organic aspect. Instead of having a clinical appearance they were to look as though they were a natural part of the landscape and had grown under the loving care and supervision of craftsmen: *'the mechanical look of… architecture,'* declared Prior, *'is readily explained. The world, by employing the professional architect, does not admit of Architecture being an art.'*[6] This was something he, and other Arts and Crafts men, were determined to rectify.

Prior was not a prolific architect. Much of his time was devoted to scholarship. By the time he designed St Andrew's he had already written a number of books, including *The History of Gothic Art in England* (1900), and such work enabled him to become Slade Professor of Art at Cambridge in 1912. He died in 1932. Of him an article in an issue of *Architect and Building News* published that year recalled: *'He could be something of a grizzly bear at times for he was pertinacious, and his opinion, once formed was hardly to be changed….Yet it was a kindly bear withal, that would emerge, honours divided, from a wordy warfare with a joyous twinkle in its eye, and for any small personal attention or service, it would be immensely grateful and appreciative.'*[7]

In 1905 Prior completed his first plans for St Andrew's Church. In June of the following year construction work commenced (the church was dedicated on 12 June 1906) and it was consecrated on 19 July 1907. In all, the church cost around £13,000.

St Andrew's is not Prior's earliest church. That honour belongs to Holy Trinity in Bockenhampton, Dorset, a small, simple structure, dating from 1887-9. Though much larger, St Andrew's shares some of its characteristics such as simplicity, spaciousness, and transverse arches which spring from a low elevation.

Prior chose the architect, Randall Wells, to serve as his clerk of works at St Andrew's and he was allowed to change the plan in detail. They had worked together previously at Home Place, a substantial and distinctive house near Holt in Norfolk (1903-5), and before this Wells had been clerk of works at Lethaby's important church at Brockhampton, Herefordshire in 1901-2.

Description

St Andrew's stands near the crest of rising land (when approached from the south) a short distance from the seafront. Its lawned grounds are fairly extensive and are enclosed by a rough stone wall lined with trees. The church is not the only building in the enclosure for it is adjoined to the west by the Priestman Hall, erected in 1928 to serve as a parish hall. Though not by Prior, the hall is a tasteful work in keeping with the church. Furthermore, although St Andrew's stands amid housing, originally the ground immediately to the north was part of Roker Farm and was only developed between the wars.

The church is 160ft (48.8m) long and 68ft (20.6m) wide across the transepts. It is primarily built of grey magnesian limestone quarried a few miles to the north at Marsden and most of the masonry is random in nature. The exterior is dominated by the tower which, unusually, is located at the east end. The tower is 80ft (24.5m) high and reminiscent of a

View down the nave towards the sanctuary at the east end of the church

keep. Initially its polygonal angle turrets with pierced parapets were topped by pointed roofs, but these were removed before the First World War because they were unsafe during gales. The stairs to the tower are located in a semicircular sub tower with slit windows which adjoins the north face of the main tower. The lesser tower reaches about three quarters of the way up the main tower and a flying buttress from its roof connects with the former.

Another unusual feature of the design is that the sanctuary projects a few feet to the east of the tower, with its roof at the same height as that of the nave to the west, thereby creating the impression that the church has been punched through the tower from west to east.

The window tracery is basic. It is angular and supported by plain mullions. Moreover, stained glass is conspicuous by its virtual absence. Adding to the plainness of the exterior is the fact that the substantial buttresses along the north and south sides of the nave do not protrude far from the outer face of the walls. Originally, the roof was covered in slabs of yellow York stone but for reasons which are not entirely clear these have been replaced by slate.

The principal entrance is located at the south-west end of the nave where the porch contains a small tablet with a brief inscription enjoining prayer by the celebrated typographer and calligrapher Eric Gill, who was just beginning his career at the time of St Andrew's construction.

Upon entering the nave the overwhelming impression is one of great spaciousness and light. There is, moreover, a great sense of power. The nave is 52ft (15.8m) wide for most of its length (the width is reduced at the west end by the provision of porches), and is 109ft (33.3m) long. The absence of stained glass in the very large west window and the four substantial windows along both the north and south sides of the nave contribute greatly to the first impression, while the sense of power is chiefly derived from the five great elliptical transverse arches. These are partly supported by large buttresses which are almost entirely within the church. The arches spring from about 8ft (2.5m) above floor level and rise to a ridge of concrete reinforced by steel rods running the length of the nave at a height of about 44ft (13.5m)—Prior had used concrete before, most notably at Home Place. The arches are likewise of reinforced concrete, in this case iron, but are faced with

stone. Furthermore, in addition to the ridge are two steel reinforced concrete purlins running parallel to it. In true Arts and Crafts fashion the exposed rafters are of rough, untreated English oak. The overall effect is reminiscent of the ribs and keel of an upturned ship.

The transverse arches, as noted, are partly supported by the buttresses. In addition, their weight is largely carried by substantial lintels which protrude from the buttresses about 3ft (1m) into the body of the church where they are supported by pairs of slender hexagonal piers with cushion capitals, with the exception of the easternmost arch which is supported by larger single piers. All the piers were intended to be of marble but stone was used instead by Wells to save money, a decision in keeping with his character. As at Holy Trinity, Bockenhampton, Prior dispensed with traditional side aisles. Instead, there are small passages running along the north and south sides of the nave by means of which the pews can be entered and at regular intervals these passages are crossed by the lintels referred to above and defined by the hexagonal piers.

Running along the north and south sides of the nave is plain oak panelling of uneven width which reaches to the height of the soffits of the lintels over the passages. The floor of the nave is covered with stone flags except for the area occupied by the plain oak pews where there is wood block.

At the west end of the nave is a splendid font by Randall Wells, (the oak cover is an addition made in the middle of the 20th century by 'Mousey' Thompson of Kilburn in Yorkshire). The font has a circular stone bowl which is large enough for an infant to be entirely immersed, and this is supported by five legs on a raised plinth. One of the legs supports the centre of the bowl and is smaller than the others which were elaborately carved by Wells.

Near the font is a stone tablet in the wall just to the east of the north-west doorway. It is dedicated to the memory of Mrs Jane Priestman and the script is by Eric Gill. Another celebrated figure whose work can be seen at St Andrew's was the architect and furniture maker, Ernest Gimson, who had a famous workshop at Sapperton in the Cotswolds. The lectern is his most notable piece of work here. It is located at the east end of the nave and just to the south

The font

of steps leading up to the choir. It is modelled on a medieval cantor's lectern and is made of ebony inlaid with ivory, mother-of-pearl and silver, and has a double-sided swivelling top with candle brackets of polished wrought iron.

To the north, and almost parallel with the lectern, is the pulpit, again Gimson's work, on

The lectern

the other side of the choir steps. It rests on a stone pedestal and is hexagonal.

The foot of the choir steps is a good place to note a structural feature of the church. The sanctuary, to the east of the choir, is much narrower than the nave and two squinch arches thus spring diagonally at an angle of 45 degrees across from the east end of the nave to the main sanctuary arch.

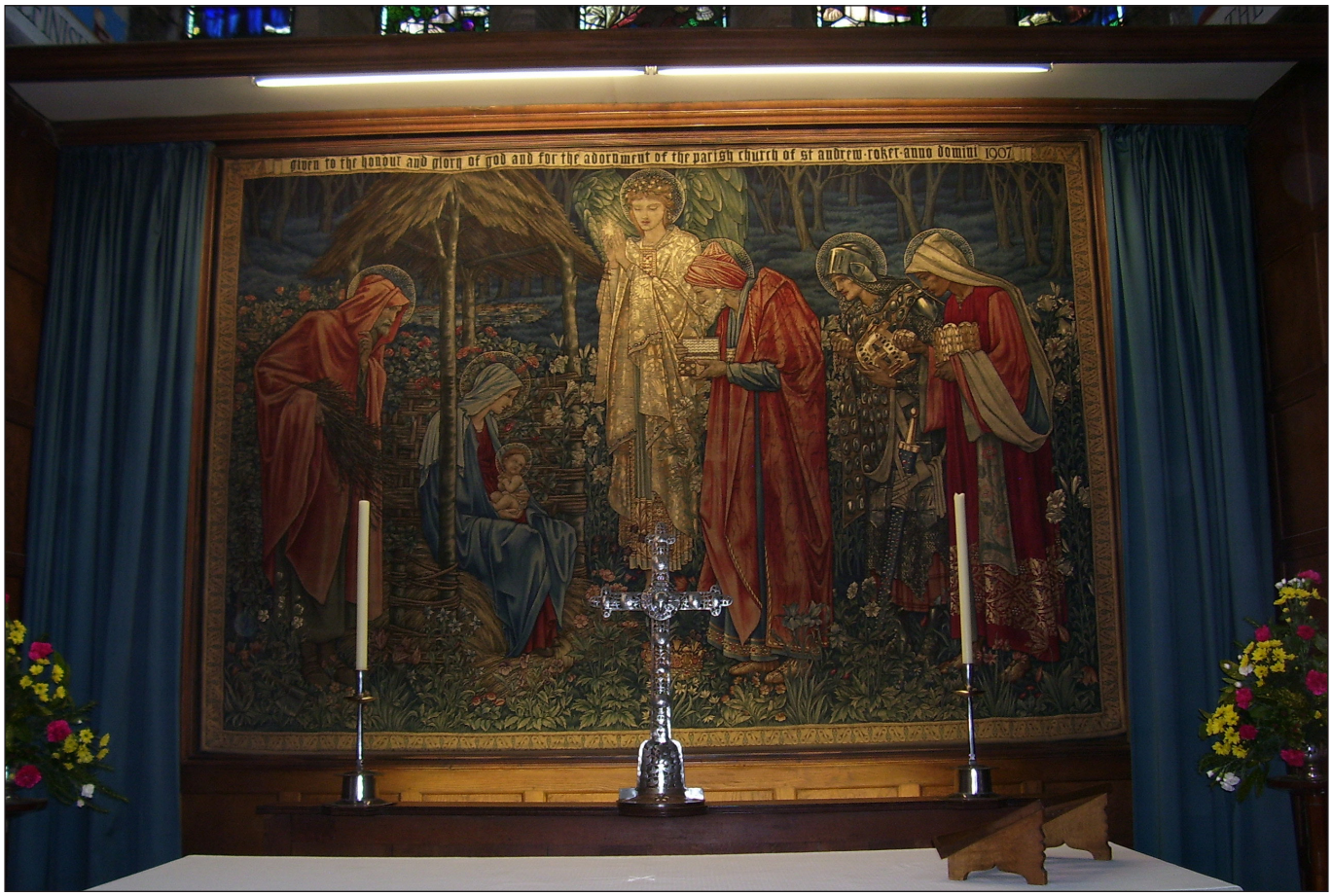
North and south of the diagonal arches are the small transepts. The north transept serves as the vestry and is entered from the east end of the passage running along the north side of the nave. The vestry is a plain room 17ft (5.3m) by 17ft, save for a small recess on the north-west side.

Directly beneath the arch which delimits the north transept is the organ. It is interesting to note that Priestman was an enthusiastic organist and served in this capacity at St Andrew's until the 1920s.

The south transept, which contains the Lady Chapel, measures 25ft (7.7m) from west to east by 23ft (7m), and is far more attractive than its counterpart. This is due, in part, to the provision of stained glass in two of the windows. The largest of these, in the south wall, has a scene depicting Christ's words *'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'* and is the work of Henry Payne.

The choir, 21ft long by 24ft (6.5m by 7.3m), is located between the transepts and is dominated by the organ along its north side, the beauty of the sanctuary to the east, and by the attractive Lady Chapel. The choir stalls are subtly designed and beautifully made and are, again, the work of Gimson. In the area of the stalls the floor of the choir is covered in wood block. Across the centre of the choir, however, running west to east between the stalls, it is covered with flagstones which are largely covered by an excellent carpet by William Morris and Co. of Merton Abbey. This runs up to the high altar at the east end of the sanctuary whose floor is entirely covered with flagstones.

The sanctuary is 29ft (9m) and tapers slightly from west to east—the width is 20ft (6m) and 17ft (5.2m) respectively. It differs markedly from the rest of the church for it is sumptuous and ornate. Instead of having masses of bare walls, as is largely the case elsewhere at St Andrew's, its walls are covered by oak panelling which rises to the sills of the windows, and above the panelling the walls are plastered and painted. The domed ceiling is likewise covered with painted plaster.



An excellent tapestry by Morris and Co.

The sanctuary's impressive ceiling

The east end of the sanctuary is the most eye-catching. Here, on the wall above the high altar table (the cross and candlesticks are by Gimson), is a splendid tapestry by Morris and Co. It is a reproduction of a painting by Edward Burne-Jones. The subject is the 'Adoration of the Magi.' They are shown presenting their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant Jesus. Moreover, the donors represent the three ages of man, youth, middle and old age, and the three branches of mankind descended from Noah's sons, Shem, Ham and Japeth.

Above the tapestry is the magnificent east window with stained glass by Payne. The subject depicted is the 'Ascension.' This window leads the eye up to the domed ceiling which, like the upper stage of the sanctuary's walls, was painted in 1927 by MacDonald Gill (Eric Gill's brother) to a design by Prior. The theme is the 'Creation.' While sea and land creatures are portrayed at the east end of the north and south walls, as are Adam and Eve, the ceiling is the most imposing part of the work. Here, among other things, are depicted the moon and stars while, in the centre, is the sun (represented by a hemispherical light fitting) with long painted rays.

Towards the east end of the sanctuary are doors which give access to two small mural chambers and of these the southernmost is used to ring a bell for mattins and evensong.

Though St Andrew's present heating dates from 1984, before that date the church was served by a warm-air heating system devised by Prior. The heating chamber was located beneath the choir. A fan forced air (which had passed through a filter under the Lady Chapel), over a large coil of hot water pipes supplied by a boiler, and the warm air was then distributed to grille outlets in the walls and floor of the nave by an extensive hypocaust consisting of a central passage and horizontal shafts.

Discussion

The late Sir John Betjeman described St Andrew's as a *'20th century building that may reasonably lay claim to greatness,' 'a bold and imaginative experiment which has triumphantly succeeded.'*[8] Others have felt likewise. As noted at the outset, Pevsner was one such. He regarded St Andrew's as one of the finest English churches of its time. Christopher Grillet has gone further, St Andrew's is Prior's *'chef-d'oeuvre. What he achieved here is (perhaps side by side with Lutyens's St Jude's at the Hampstead Garden Suburb) the best English church of the early 20th century.'*[9]

Unquestionably St Andrew's is a great church. It skilfully combines tradition with bold experimentation, and a sense of grandeur with human proportions. This is demonstrated in the nave. Here the great transverse arches have a primitive and very powerful effect, but this is tempered somewhat by the fact that they spring from a low elevation and partly rest on slender hexagonal piers: *'the strong, primitive quality of the structural form'* is transformed *'into a gentler, more habitable world just above head height.'*[10] This effect is strengthened by the presence of the oak panelling rising as high as the soffits of the lintels connecting the piers to the outer walls.

It is not just the structure of St Andrew's which makes the church notable. The contributions of Randall Wells, Eric Gill, Ernest Gimson, Henry Payne, MacDonald Gill, and Morris and Co., add lustre to the remarkable building and transform it into a veritable museum of Arts and Crafts taste. It is, as the church notice board once proudly proclaimed—and should proclaim again—*'the Cathedral of the Arts and Crafts Movement.'*

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Graham Potts for initially interesting me in St Andrew's Church, and my brother Gavin Dodds for his assistance in both measuring the church and drawing up the plan.

This article was first published by the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland in the *Durham Archaeological Journal* volume 10, 1994. The photographs, by the author, are more recent.

Endnotes:

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2 Fordyce W. *History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham*, vol. II, 1857, p.422.
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