

Bridgekirk Parish Church



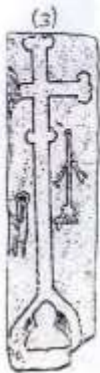
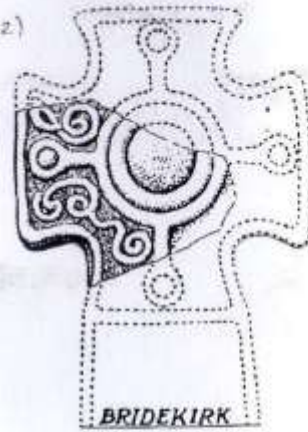
A Brief History

Some Ancient Stones of Bridekirk Church.

FIGURE 1)



(2.)



Welcome

Welcome to St. Bridget's Church Bridekirk serving the communities of Bridekirk, Dovenby, Papcastle and Tallentire.

We pray God will bless you as you visit this historic place where Christians have followed Jesus Christ for 1,000 years.



A Brief History.

Norse-Irish settlers from Ireland and the Isle of Man dedicated churches to Celtic saints such as Patrick, Bridget (Bride) and Columba. St. Bridget's life spanned the latter fifth and early sixth centuries. She was said to be the daughter of an Ulster Prince and founded the abbey of Kildare in the fifth century, becoming its renowned abbess. Her prayers and reputed miracles greatly influenced the early church in Ireland.

Bridekirk is eleventh or twelfth century Scandinavian for the church of St. Bride.

The first church at Bridekirk was probably wooden and was replaced in 1130 with the Norman church, marked by the chancel ruin standing in the churchyard. A further church was planned as early as 1703, following a critical report by the then Bishop of Carlisle, William Nicholson. With the church floor below the level of the graveyard, the building oozed with damp. The chancel was “scandalous, nasty and decayed,” the Bishop reported.

Yet it was not until 1868 that the architects Messrs Cory and Fergusson received the contract and sum of £2,671 to build a new stone church, lined with brick. Architecturally the church is neo-Norman, cruciform with apse and crossed tower. Some features from the Norman building were transferred to the Victorian church. The new church was consecrated in 1870, when the parish priest was the Rev James Carter.

The Porch.

Inside the porch is one of the original Norman doorways transferred from the old church, with typical chevron patterns around the archway. Above the doorway is a semi-circular carving, known as a ‘tympanum’. This piece of red sandstone dates from the 11th or 13th centuries. Although eroded by the weather, the head of Christ with forked beard and hand raised in blessing is thought to represent Christ’s Resurrection or Ascension into heaven (see figure 1).



Dating the tympanum as probably 11th century is of interest. William the Conqueror declared the English Earl Waltheof as Lord of Allerdale in 1070, being administered from Papcastle. Waltheof married William's niece Judith in 1071. Suspected of complicity in a plot to overthrow the king, Waltheof was executed in 1075. In 1078 Waltheof's widow Judith founded the Benedictine abbey of Elstow in Bedfordshire, where there is an 11th century tympanum like the one at Bridekirk. It is considered that because Judith had links to Allerdale, she may have helped Bridekirk Church, including the gift of this stone that was later incorporated into the Norman church.

The style of carving Christ with twin-peaked beard returned again during the 13th century, giving the alternative date for the tympanum.

The Nave.

An unusual feature of the church is the twelfth century font, attributed to a stonemason called Richard of Durham, who is thought to have lived between 1120 and 1180. In reality the true identity of the artist is unknown, but it is nevertheless a masterpiece of the mason's art. It is also inscribed with probably the best preserved inscription of Norse runes in England. The runes translate into an early form of English, rather than Old Norse, making the inscription unique. Please see detailed guide information about the font.



On the wall behind the font there are two interesting plaques. One plaque refers to the consecration of this church building in 1870 by the Bishop of Carlisle. Note the reference to the fact that the seats in the nave were to be free. Prior to this time, in accordance with general practice, only those in a position to afford 'rent' had the privilege of sitting during services. The seats in the chancel, however, were designated for 'lay rectors,' significant benefactors from the different areas of the parish. The brass plaque found under the floor of the old church, commemorates John Lancaster, a musician who died in 1666. There is a translation of the Latin inscription alongside by Canon Sutton, Vicar of Bridekirk from 1881 to 1939.

Some of the earlier benefactors to the church are recorded by dedications of stained glass windows, designed by various artists, with several being made by Powell's of Whitefriars, the leading stained glass workshop of the time. The west windows and transept ends are by Clayton and Bell.

Looking down at the floor in the aisle, notice how the cast iron heating pipe covers are moulded with a vine-scroll design, taken from carved

decoration on the font, thereby carrying the symbolism of Jesus the True Vine throughout the church.

The stone on the windowsill on the north side of the nave is part of a 10th century Anglo-Scandinavian cross, similar in style to the cross on the Giant's Grave at Penrith (see figure 2).

Opinions differ about the origins of the stone on the opposite windowsill (which was found in the churchyard in 1911) between being part of a Romanesque carved panel, or a genuine piece of Roman sculpture. Those who have claimed it to be Roman consider it to be a dedication to the Romano-British water goddess Coventina. The full extent of Roman settlement in Bridekirk is unknown, but in recent years a small part of a Roman building was excavated just north of the churchyard boundary. Shrines to Coventina were erected at freshwater springs; one is known on the Roman Wall. Was there a similar shrine in Roman Bridekirk?

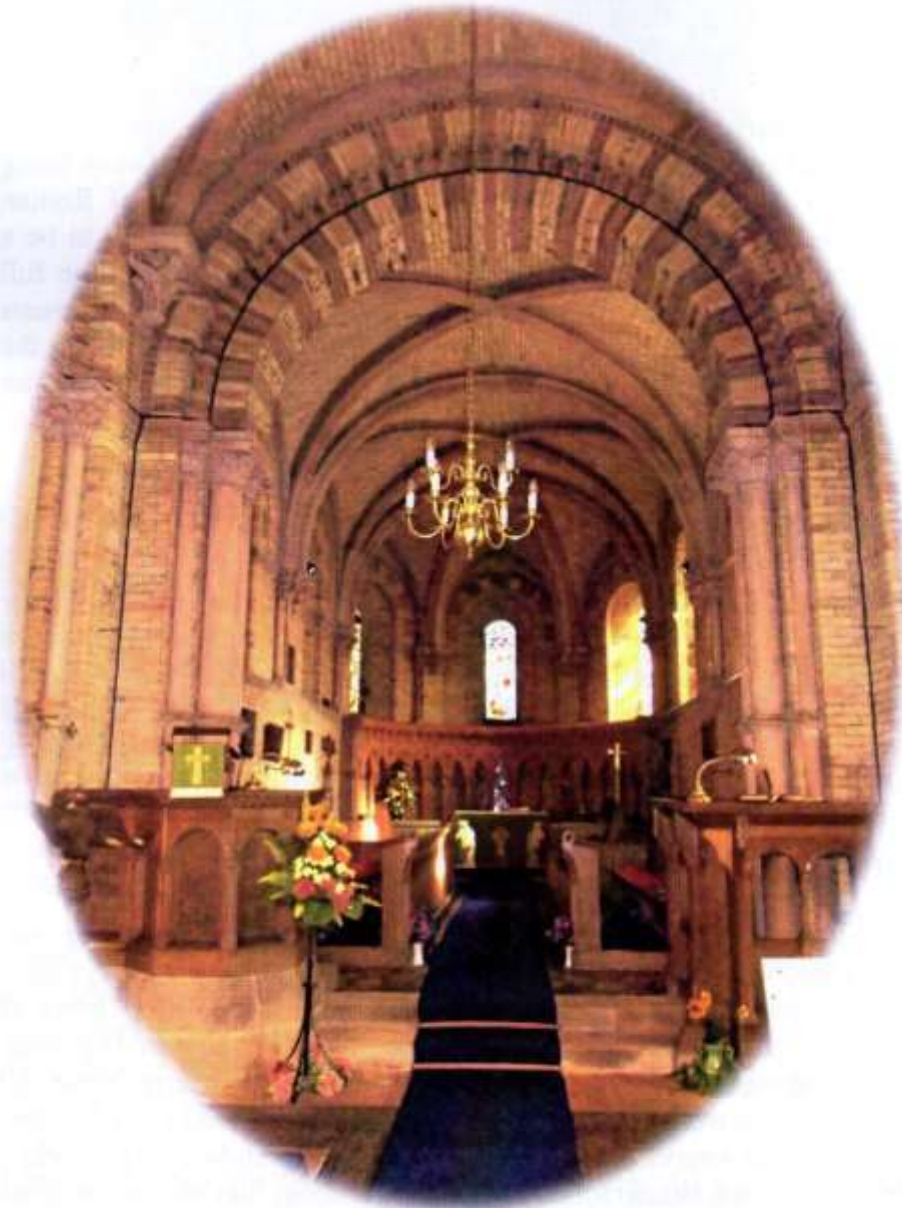
North and South Transepts.

The Norman arch over the organ in the north transept is the former chancel arch from the old church. Under the arch, the organ console consists of two manuals, swell and great with foot pedals and was built and installed by Rushworth & Dreaper of Liverpool in 1930. In the west side of the south transept there is a stained glass window of St. Bride, attributed to Powell.

The Chancel.

The chancel is an excellent example of Victorian furnishing and decoration, with fine red sandstone reredos inset with fleur-de-lys tiles. A glass case containing the trowel and mallet used by Mrs Dykes of Dovenby Hall to lay the foundation stone of this building in 1868 may be seen, along with an 18th century collection box transferred from the old church. Above in the south-east side there is a stained glass window of Fides (faith expressed as a goddess) by Henry Holiday. He worked with Sir Edward Burne-Jones and took over from him as stained glass

window designer at Powell's Glass Works, after Burne-Jones left in 1861 to work for Morris & Co. G.P. Hutchinson, another influential artist in the Arts and Crafts Movement, designed the windows showing Hope and Charity. The east window is by Wailes.



Victorian brickwork is unsurpassed in quality, exemplified here by the specially moulded bricks to frame the windows, with elongated wedge shaped bricks to form the arches over the windows, also to construct the main arches at the crossing under the tower, and to form the ribbed vault ceiling.

Ancient Stones Outside the Church.

The archway over the door into the south transept is from the Norman church. An ancient stone is incorporated into the wall to the left of this doorway. It has been called the 'Passion Stone' because it represents the wounds of Christ's hands, feet and heart, made by the nails, lance and the crown of thorns. Another school of thought recognises it as 'The Trinity Stone' depicting the Father (a heart); the Son (open hands in blessing) and the Holy Spirit (a dove).

Standing sentinel around the outside apse of the church are ten ancient grave slabs (see figures 3 to 12). The majority display simple carved designs typical of – though not exclusive to – the 13th century. A sword, ploughshare, or shepherds crook carved on a stone was for a man, additionally, a sword accompanied by a coat of arms denoted a knight. Shears indicated the grave of a woman, sometimes accompanied by keys. Very occasionally shears were used for the grave of a priest along with a cross. Priests were more often represented by the symbol of a chalice and / or a book.

Brief details of the grave slabs are as follows; going in an anti-clockwise direction around the apse:

(3) With a cross shaft rising from an arch base and simple fleur-de-lys terminals at the cross head, it displays shears and a chatelaine carrying at least three keys.

(4) A plain boat-shaped stone, described as a 'hogback' by Bernard Bradbury in his book 'A History of Cockermouth'. Hogbacks are 10th century Anglo-Scandinavian grave markers shaped in the form of miniature Viking longhouses. Compared to other Cumbrian hogbacks,

such as at Penrith and Gosforth, the Bridekirk stone is atypical, being shallower and undecorated. It may not be a hogback and the lack of distinguishing features makes dating difficult; it could range from Anglo-Saxon to late medieval.

(5) Fawn sandstone slab with splay-arm cross and disc at head of shaft, probably 12th century.

(6) Simple rectangular slab of orange sandstone with straight-armed cross.

(7) Round-leaf bracelet cross rising from stepped base with shears, probably 13th century.

(8) Cross shaft rising from crude stepped base, with sword and ploughshare – 12th century.

(9) Pink sandstone slab with small incised cross.

(10) Part of a slab showing cross shaft and ploughshare.

(11) Part of an incised slab with cross shaft, sword and inscription 'hiciacet'.

(12) Resting upside down against the wall is the most important of the ancient grave slabs. It has a high quality relief carved design of a cross, foliated with oak branches and cross head of the interlaced diamond type, with a straight-armed cross at the head centre. To one side of the cross is a square tablet representing a book. Opposite the book there was once a pair of shears, which have unfortunately disintegrated, along with much of the cross head, due to weathering and the friable nature of the red sandstone. This was probably on the grave of a priest, but just possibly, it may have been for a nun.

Behind this slab there is a rough rectangular block of stone with damaged recess. This was the base for a free standing stone cross, probably pre-Conquest, but without any carved decoration (unlike

examples at Tullie House Museum) it is not possible to determine if it is of Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Scandinavian origin.

(13) To find the final grave slab, look inside the ruined chancel of the old church, where it has been used as the internal lintel of the barred window in the south wall when the chancel was extended in the 16th (?) century. Probably dating from the late 13th century, it has bracelet derivative cross with terminals, in form something between a trefoil and fleur-de-lys, rising from a trefoiled arch base. There is a long sword on the right of the cross shaft and shield on the left. No traces of a device can be seen upon the shield.

The Vicarage.

The old vicarage beside the church dates back to Queen Anne and the new vicarage stands adjacent to the churchyard. Famous children of the vicarage include Thomas Tickell, poet and writer from the first half of the 18th century and Sir Joseph Williamson (in 1678, he gave to Bridekirk a Spanish silver chalice, circa 1550) who was Secretary of State during the reign of Charles II.



Today's Christian community meets here every Sunday at 11am. You would be most welcome to join them. There is a Sunday School for primary age children every Sunday during term-time.

