

History of St Michael's

St Michael's, the third church in Wark, is a fine example of Regency Gothic. The first church was built in memory of King Aldwarf, murdered in 688, and the second around 1100.

Wark was one of the ancient chapelries of Simonburn parish which was mentioned in 1360, when it shared a chaplain with Haughton. After the reformation, the church was allowed to fall into decay. In 1760 Bishop Pococke described it as follows:

'We passed by Wark chapel which is almost in ruins, and would be a very convenient place for a chapel, as they cannot pass to Bellingham when the waters are high; and they are four miles from Simonburn church; what remains is an old building and seems to have been larger, there being two arches supported by sort of Doric octagonal pillars now filled up with part of the north wall; half a mile beyond it is the village of Warke with a large mote-hill close to it.'

As late as 1825 remains of the chapel were still visible:-

'Half a mile to the north of Wark, on the road side, near Kirkfield, are the ruins of a church. It had but one aisle, but there is reason to suppose it had been larger at some former period, as the wall on the north side consisted, in part, of an arch and two pillars, which were standing a few years ago. A mountain ash grows upon the north wall, and has a most singular and striking appearance. A large flat stone, supposed to have been the altar table, was found among the ruins. In front of the church is a monumental stone with this inscription:-' Here lyeth interred the body of Rowland Finlay, who departed the V day of February, Anno dom.1686....Under this stone...as good a mason...as any one.' It is said he was a mason in the neighbourhood of Kirkfield, who wished to be interred there. It must have been long after the church was used as a place of worship, as there is no other inscription to be seen.

The modern church stands on the road side a short distance north of the little town which clusters under the Moathill. Consecrated in August 1818, it cost the Greenwich Hospital Commissioners, with its parsonage, £7,470 17s 0. It closely resembles Humshaugh church but has a tower of quite good outline and dignified by a pair of long buttresses at its corners. The church is built of free stone and has a low pitched slated roof. It was built by R.Duke of Gateshead and W.Profit of North Shields. The new church is dedicated in honour of St.Michael. The following is the account of Wark given by Archbishop Singleton in 1832:-

'The Revd. Isham Baggs,A.B., of Merton Coll., Oxford, Rector. He has served as a naval chaplain 17 years and once chaplain of the house of Assembly (and beneficed) in the island of Jamaica. Wark is a very pleasant and habitable place, the church and house are situated on a rising ground, just above the village, and Mr. Baggs (as indeed have all his naval bretheren) has made the little ground about his residence extremely neat and pretty.'

The Rectory contains the town ships of Wark, Wark Burn and Shitlington (High and Low) having a population of about 900. The church holds 200. They have service and sermon once a day(sic probably for once on Sunday) , the average congrugation of 60 and 40 communicants, 130 boys and girls are freely educated by the revenues of Tocket Farm in the principles of the national church. This

farm was a part of Giles Heron's well-known charity. There are two church wardens. The registers begin in 1818. The sacramental plate consists of a silver cup and patten, the former marked, 'Wark Rectory.' There is a sort of excrescence in this church at the east end, which, being taken for a chancel is thrown for reparation on the Rector, which is rather serious, as containing 'the large end window' which Mr. Baggs has already repaired. There are no papists in Wark but there is a Methodist as well as a Presbyterian meeting house. There is a Sunday school attended to by the rector's daughters, which averages 30 scholars and a day school in the village of Warksburn with about 12 scholars.

The baptisms average 25 p.a., marriages average 6 p.a., funerals average 2 p.a.

The King's Arms (to which the Commissioners of the Hospital have with very questionable propriety added a blazon of their own) are affixed to the walls of the west end, and a pew called 'the founders' Pew' is also reserved.

The East window is designed by Henry Holiday, an artist who excelled in drapery, producing figure subjects close in spirit to Rossetti. The three figures together in one window is believed to be unique to St. Michael's. The inscription reads 'He took them up in his arms and blessed them'.

The plain windows are as specified by H. H. Seward who designed St Michael's.

The window in the porch was restored in 2009, as a gift by family and friends in memory of Peter Bell 1967-2003 late of Wark and Bellingham. It was designed by a former Rector, Canon Stanley Prins.

The font bears the inscription: To the glory of God and in loving memory of Hugh Taylor M.A. Sometime curate of this parish. Died April 6th. 1883

'The altar cross, which originally stood on the altar of The Royal Chapel within Buckingham Palace was graciously presented by His Majesty King George V to the parish of Wark-upon-Tyne, on the twelfth day of November in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and thirty-one during the incumbency of the Reverend Spencer Wade B.A. 'This is the inscription on the back of the cross.

The altar cross was given to the palace by Tzar Nicholas II.