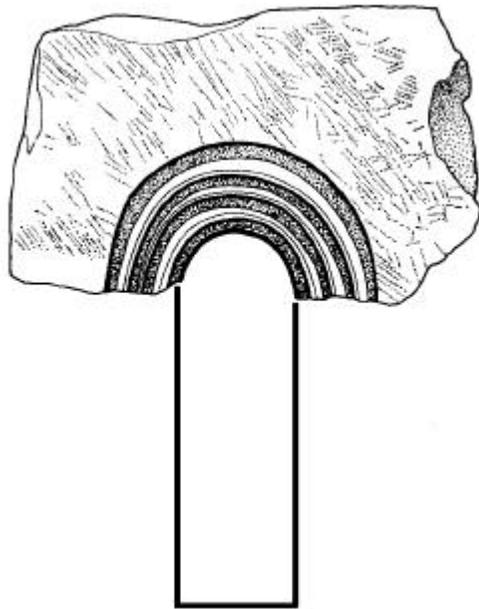


Historic Churches of West Yorkshire



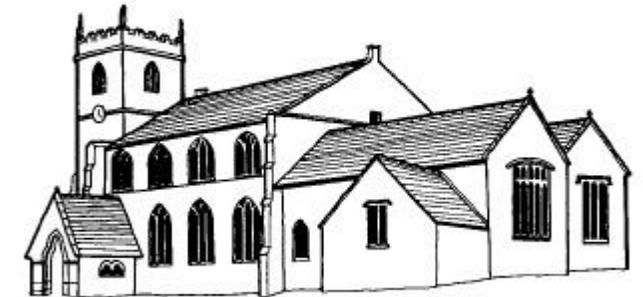
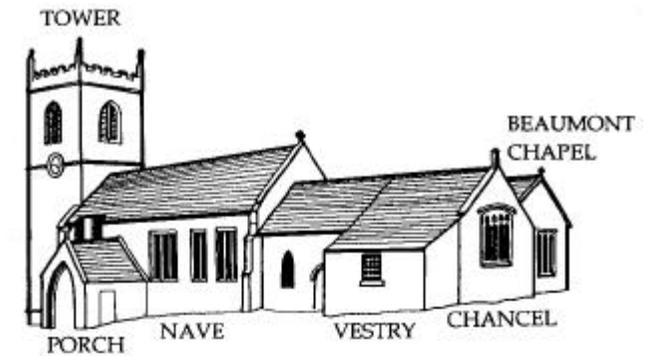
Kirkheaton Church

Kirkheaton Church near Huddersfield, has a history which goes back at least to the 9th century on the evidence of its Anglo-Saxon cross fragments. The stone windowhead shown above has also been dated to Anglo-Saxon times; it seems to be the sole surviving fragment of a stone chapel built in the period when Kirkheaton lay within the extensive parish of the 'minster' church at Dewsbury. Around the year 1200 Kirkheaton became a parish in its own right, an event probably marked by the erection of a large new church. Rebuildings; in the 19th century have obliterated most of the medieval structure, but this leaflet aims to piece together the building's history from surviving fragments. Information on other leaflets in this series is available from the West Yorkshire Archaeology Service, PO Box 30, Nepshaw Lane South, Leeds LS27 0UG.

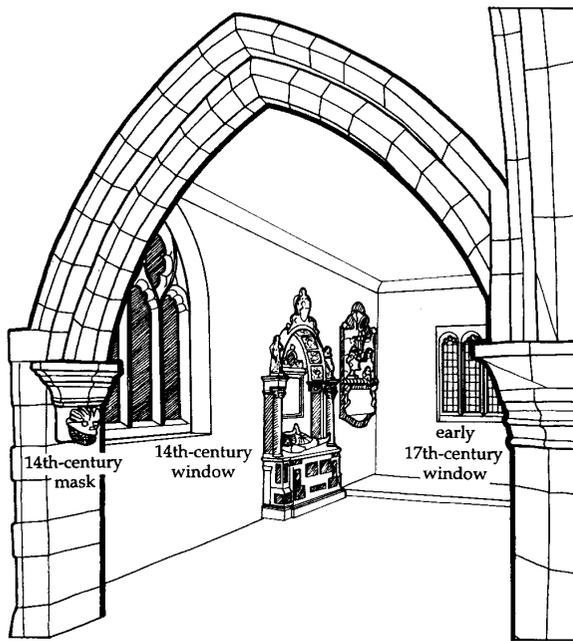
The drawing on the right, copied from an early illustration, shows Kirkheaton church as it appeared in 1818. It was at that time still substantially a medieval building; the vestry, added to the south side of the nave in 1793, had been the only major alteration since the early 17th century. The nave and chancel were the earliest parts of the structure, both probably erected in the late 12th or early 13th century when Kirkheaton gained full parochial status; they replaced an Anglo-Saxon chapel. Soon after-wards an aisle was built on the north side of the nave, and in the 14th century a chantry chapel was erected on the north side of the chancel. The chantry was later converted into a private chapel for the principal local landowners, the Beaumont family. The Beaumonts had already played a significant role in the development of the church, for in his Will dated 1468, Henry Beaumont bequeathed 40 shillings to the fabric of the Bell Tower, and 40 shillings for hanging the bells, on condition that a start was made on the construction of the Bell Tower within the space of four years.

In 1823 came a major rebuilding of the church, with the results shown on the right. The most dramatic change was to the nave, where it was decided to take down the south wall and to rebuild it 'in a handsome and substantial manner'. Also demolished and rebuilt were the south porch, the arcade of the north aisle and the chancel arch. The nave, including the area of the former north aisle, was roofed over in one span; upper rows of windows were installed in its north and south walls, to provide light for members of the congregation occupying lofts and galleries.

Further alterations were made during the next fifty years, including the installation of an underfloor heating system. This particular improvement had disastrous consequences, for it was the cause of a devastating fire in 1886. Despite the efforts of local people who fought the fire with buckets, pails and a borrowed hosepipe, much of the furniture, including the west gallery, was destroyed. Rather than repairing the damage, it was decided to take down the nave and chancel and what remained of the north aisle, and to replace them with a new chancel, vestry and nave, together with new north and south aisles. The result - the present church - is shown in the drawing on the right. In the course of this work several ancient carved stones were recovered and preserved: these included Anglo-Saxon cross fragments,

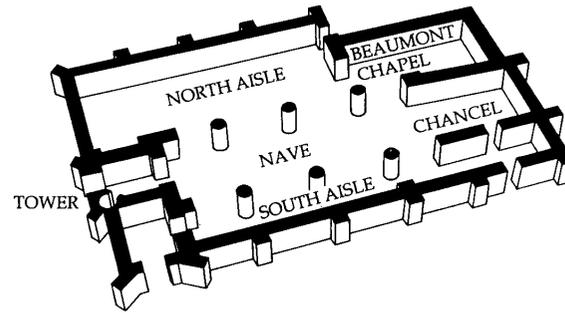


medieval graveslabs and some architectural pieces. But of the medieval church which survived until 1823, only the tower and the Beaumont chapel now remain.



The only parts of the medieval church which have survived to the present day are the Beaumont chapel and the tower. The drawing above shows the chapel, viewed from the west through the archway opening from the north aisle. Most of the archway, including the grotesque mask carved on its north side, dates to the 14th century. So, too, does the fine window with curving tracery seen just beyond the mask, in the north wall.

Originally dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the chapel was a chantry where masses were celebrated for the souls of the departed. When all chantries were abolished by the government in the mid-16th century, this one, which had for long served as a burial place for the Beaumont family, was taken over by them as their private chapel. The medieval chapel was shorter than the present one: it did not extend so far eastwards. But within a century of taking over the chapel the Beaumonts had enlarged it to its present size; the east window, seen through the archway on the right-hand side, belongs to this work. The precise date of enlargement is not known, but the work may be associated with the burial here of Sir Richard Beaumont in 1631, and with the erection of his fine painted wall-tomb under its elaborate canopy.



Apart from the windowhead shown on the front of this leaflet, a total of four pieces of Anglo-Saxon sculptured stone have been found at Kirkheaton; they are now housed, along with the windowhead, in the Tolson Memorial Museum at Huddersfield. All of them have been dated to the late 9th or early 10th century, and all are Anglian in style; there is no evidence of Viking influence in their decoration. Of the two stones illustrated here (above right, each showing a face and a side), the upper one is a memorial with part of an inscription in the runic alphabet: it reads 'Eoh (the name of a person) made [this]'. The carved decoration is of poor quality, copying better carved designs on stones at Dewsbury. The link with Dewsbury is an interesting one, given that Kirkheaton was at that time within Dewsbury parish.

The stone below the incised piece is part of the shaft of a tall cross. It is the most elaborately carved of all the stones from Kirkheaton. The face shows two beasts and a figure holding branches. The halo suggests the figure is a saint, and the palm branches could be a symbol of martyrdom.

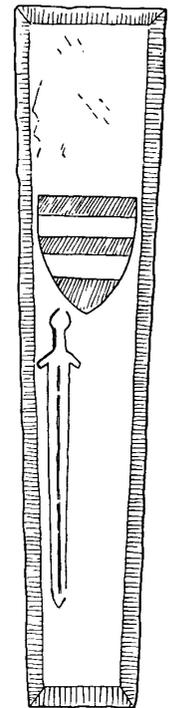
Along with the Anglo-Saxon pieces, a number of other carved stones have been found at Kirkheaton. Two capitals from a doorway, decorated in early 13th-century style and presumably from the south doorway of the medieval nave are now also in the Tolson Memorial Museum. So, too, are three grave slab fragments; each bears an incised cross, one having a design unique in the County. A fourth grave slab which remains in the church is illustrated here (above right). It has a sword and a shield, the latter bearing arms identified as those of the de Heton family. The de Hetons were important local landowners in the 13th century.



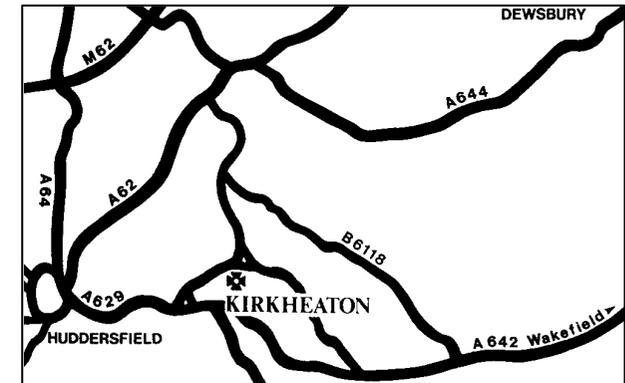
Anglo-Saxon inscribed stone



Fragment of Anglo-Saxon cross shaft



Medieval grave slab



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