

St Peter's History

The original foundation of the Church of St Peter is of a very early date, probably seventh or eighth century. The first recorded date connected with the Church is 1080 when the site was that of an old Anglo-Saxon Church. There is evidence that there was an earlier church, probably built by the Angles in the seventh century. The reconstruction probably took place about the middle of the 10th century.

It was a barn-like building with masonry of rude axe-hewn stones, wide-jointed, with almost imperishable mortar, and small doorways with single-stone arched headings. These doorways were on the north, south, and west sides; that on the west being the only survivor in-situ. The east end would probably have had a screen wall with a small archway. The present chancel with its beautiful east and south windows was erected about 1340-50.

In the 15th century the south aisle was added, the Anglo-Saxon wall being pierced by the Gothic arches and pillars which today support the roof. The windows in the outer wall show the continued use of the round-headed Norman pattern. It is thought that the south aisle and the chancel arch were rebuilt between 1500 and 1540, judging from the mouldings, and slight indications of perpendicular work. If so, much of the rough-hewn stone, and to some extent the original type of work, have been employed over again.

Some remains of the early work are in the west wall of the nave, where the blocked up doorway is to be seen. Notice the difference in height of the doorway inside and out.

The north aisle was added in 1864 when the church was extended and restored. An Anglo-Saxon doorway, discovered during these building operations, was rebuilt in the churchyard, stone by stone, by Rev. John Royds. Whitewash, which had covered the church was removed, and inside, two galleries, with their own entrances, erected as private pews, were taken down.

The oak screen, which now stands below the chancel, was wider. It is believed to have come from Cockersands Abbey but there is no confirmation of this.

The font is 'sandstone, octagonal in shape, quite plain, and may be fifteenth century. The cover is modern made in the Jacobean style by an earnest curate in the last century.

At the west end of the north aisle, is a mediaeval sepulchral slab with floriated cross and sword, and on the south-east wall of the south aisle are two seventeenth century gravestones with good raised lettering. There is another built into the east wall of the chancel in memory of William Ward, pastor of this church (dated 1670). He was noted in the Oliverian survey as a 'painful pastor of his people'. It was he who built the Old Rectory, later called Greese (meaning 'steps') House, which is adjacent to the churchyard.

The cushions and kneelers were made in 1966 by the ladies of the parish as part of their contribution to the one thousandth anniversary of Heysham; traditionally the church was founded in 967. The designs were created by Mr. Guy Barton of Hornby. Examination will show their connection with Heysham. The kneelers near the altar represent the three figures of Our Lord, His Mother and St. John, while at the communion rail they show the emblems of the four saints of the parish, St. Peter, the triple crown, St. James, the cockle shell, St. Andrew, the cross and fishing boat, and St. Patrick, serpent and shamrock. The choir cushions depict the local fishing and shipping trades, while the sedilla cushions have representations of the bread and wine of the communion.

The Bishop's chair displays the arms of the diocese of Blackburn, Manchester and Chester, all

surmounted by a mitre. Now Heysham is in the diocese of Blackburn but in the early times was part of the others.

The two bells are dated early eighteenth century.

The stone coffin (now standing beside the path in the churchyard) was found under the south window of the chancel, and contained the remains of a body, presumed to be a former rector; on his breast was the portion of a small chalice, now preserved in a niche in the north-east wall of the south aisle, near the Book of Remembrance.

The hog-back stone, near the centre south door, was found in the churchyard, but was taken inside the church in 1977 to prevent further erosion by weather. It is Viking in origin and this dates it in the 10th century. It is not unique - there are other hog-backs in Penrith churchyard and at Gosforth, but what makes it special is its perfection. It is perhaps the best example of its kind in the country. It is believed that one side represents the dark side of life and the other the joy of heaven – see [The Hogback Stone \(PDF File\)](#).

There is in the churchyard, near the front gate, the remains of an Anglo-Saxon cross. It is ornamented with foliage scroll work, but on each side there is a different depiction, of a gabled building, a seated haloed figure, a swathed figure (Lazarus?). There are also in the churchyard interesting grave covers of various dates. One of the graves with railings is of the two teenage girls who were drowned on the incoming tide during the last century. Others among the older graves give the names of those Heysham families who have been established longer than even they can remember. The first recorded mention of Heysham is in the Domesday Book. Parish registers began in 1658 but are now kept in the County Records Office at Preston.

Since 1858 the Rectory and Advowson (right of patronage) have been in the hands of the Royds family. The last member of the Royds family, Everard, to live, in Heysham, died in October 1995 at his home in Glasbury. The patronage is still with the Royds family.

At the top of the headland, and above the churchyard, stands the tiny chapel of St. Patrick. In April 1977, there took place an excavation within the chapel, and on that part between the south wall of the chapel and the wall facing it. There is a small plaque which gives some of the details of the archaeologists' findings. The area within and without the chapel as once a burial site. The experts dated the site at late sixth or early seventh century, but admit the clues are meagre. The skeletons found in the burial plots were, after carbon dating, found to be not earlier than 10th century. At the end of the excavation, the bones were re-buried in the churchyard. The stone coffins overlooking the cliff are a feature of Heysham. Any information is speculation. There is a rebate in the top of each to take a lid, and a hole at the top to take a cross. It is unlikely that they were burial places, they were not big enough, but they could have been repositories for bones.

In April 1993, a further excavation took place, on the land below the stone coffins. This time the archaeologists set out to discover how long people had lived there, and what sorts of lives they had led. There were no human remains, any human bones had disappeared centuries before, but they found more than 1200 artefacts within a very small area, which archaeologists were able to date and tell us that people had lived in the area about twelve thousand years ago. It is probably the best Neolithic site in Northern Europe. The site was returned to what it had been, for other archaeologists to discover at a time in the distant future.

Rectors

c.1190 Ralph

c.1250 Roger

c.1301 Thomas Grenwode

c.1335 Thomas de Gaylesthorpe

1349 Thomas de la More

1352 John de Hornby

1353 John Dibbleda

1369 Robert de Farington

Roger de Farington

1383 John Coly

1387 Ralph Gentyll

1394 Robert Brownfleet

1396 Thomas Greenwood

1409 Robert Bolt

1410 Thomas Whitacre

1434 Henry Highfield

1488 Philip Halstead

c.1517 John Waller

c.1522 John Singleston

c.1535 Roger Bradshaw

1568 Edward Croft

1583 William Thorpe

1591 Matthew Kitchen

1606 Thomas Calvert

William Ward

John Briggs

1674 Richard Taylor

1698 William Bushell

1735 Thomas Clarkson

1738 James Fenton

1756 Thomas Clarkson

1789 Charles Buck

1791 John Widdit

1794 Thomas Clarkson

1800 "

1813 Thomas Dunham Whitaker

1819 Thomas Clarkson

1824 Thomas Yates Ridley

1838 Robinson Shuttleworth Barton

1858 John Royds

1865 Charles Twemlow Royds

1900 Stirling C. Voules

1908 Charles Craddock Twemlow Royds

1943 John Richard Hudson Royds

1956 Albert Joseph Gillespie

1978 Angus Alexander Welsh

1988 Eric Lacey

1998 David Arthur Tickner MBE