

# Wilfred's 7th century Saxon crypts. At Hexham Abbey, and at Ripon cathedral church. Pages 1 & 2, Hexham.

Note. Wilfred died, after a somewhat tempestuous life, as Bishop of Hexham, in 709.

All pictures viewed clockwise from top left.

1. Hexham. The crypt, main chamber, looking east.
2. Roman decorated and carved stonework, reused in the crypt walling.
3. A closer view of reused Roman decorated stonework.

Note: main chamber is barrel vaulted and measures about 14 ft by 8 ft.

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There remains at Hexham some quite substantial parts of Wilfred's church above ground, in addition to his crypt. However, a golden opportunity was lost when the present nave was built in 1908, as there was no dedicated or specific excavation carried out prior to the build, and that mostly in the closing years of the 19th century. I quote from H.Taylor (Anglo-Saxon Architecture, Volume I, page 299) "A careful account of information which came to light during work on the church over a period of 30 years or more, particularly during the rebuilding of the nave, was kept by Mr.C.C.Hodges, resident architect and loving historian of the abbey. But such a record of chance discoveries can at best give much less information than would reasonably be expected from a series of systematic excavations, such as could have been carried out before the new nave was built." Be that as it may, the nave rests upon older stonework, mostly in the north wall, comprising 2 courses of pre-conquest work exhibiting signs of Roman tooling. Dr.H.Taylor's words again, "may be taken as defining the north wall of Wilfred's church." The information gleaned by Hodges gives a tantalising glimpse of what is probably several phases of building and rebuilding up to the conquest.

Note: the Roman stone would doubtless have been robbed from the fort at Corbridge, which only some 3 miles distant.

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4. Stonework in the crypt exhibiting Roman tooling. Note: some of the doorways were cut about to give easier access when used as a burial place by a local family after 1726, the date of its rediscovery. It was not until 1846 that attention was drawn to the probability that this crypt and the similar one at Ripon were both the work of Wilfred.

5. Remains of an apse under the floor of the present chancel. Taylor gives reasons why he considers it to be the remains of an apse which belongs to a separate church standing to the east of Wilfred's church. Using Hodges plans of discovered foundations, including the apse, Dr. Taylor shows how he understood the apse belonged to a separate, free-standing, apsidal chapel, about 23 ft long



internally, and about 11 ft wide, with walls about 2 ft 6 in. thick. It would have stood about 20 ft clear from the east wall of Wilfred's church in a similar arrangement seen at St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, in the relation between the principal church dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul and the later chapel dedicated to St. Mary. In this way, Wilfred's principal altar at the east end would have stood immediately above his crypt. Only later would these two buildings have been joined, again as happened at Canterbury.

6. The Frith stool, a Saxon 'cathedra' (Bishop's throne) - one of only two surviving examples of Saxon date.

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7 & 8. The main chamber of the crypt, measuring 11 ft 6 in. from east to west and about 7 ft 6 in. wide and 9 ft high. Dr.H.Taylor says that “. . . A main chamber orientated from east to west and covered by a barrel vault about 9 ft high from the floor to the crown of the arch. It has recently been shown that

the vault is formed of flagstones wedged between vaulting ribs, which cross the chamber from north to south, and are about 15 in. deep, tapering from a width of about 8 in. on the inner face to about 5 in. above. The walls of the chamber are built of carefully dressed large blocks of stone and contain 4 small recesses presumably to hold lamps. There are differences between the Hexham and Ripon crypts, both are entered from a western ante-chamber, or vestibule, but unlike Hexham, that at Ripon is covered by a quadrant-shaped half vault instead of a semi-circular barrel vault. At Ripon the walls are lime washed and therefore the stonework is sadly somewhat ‘hidden’ as a result.

The north passage is now blocked at its eastern end.

It is worth remarking upon the foundations discovered in 1931 under the present crossing.



There were found in the foundations two great columns 3 ft 6 in. in diameter. One was not in situ and so was removed and is on view standing at the west end of the north aisle. Its companion on the south side was in situ and was not disturbed.

