

## **A Guide to Foston Church©**

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Revised edition by Michael Stansfield 2004

An Architectural History of All Saints parish church abstracted from the above

The history of Foston is closely connected with both the manor of Foston and the church. There was a church at Foston at the time of the Domesday Survey, but records show that, before the Conquest, the manor of Foston belonged to the Saxon Earl Morcar, and the church went with it. After the Conquest, both were held by Stephen of Aumale, son of Odo. Amidst other imposing titles, he was Count of Champagne, Earl of Albemarle, and Lord of Holderness. He was later also a commander on the First Crusade and in fact he died in the Holy Land in 1127, but not before he had given Foston church to the Benedictine Abbey of St. Mary in York, a gift confirmed by royal charter from King Henry II.

After St. Mary's suppression by King Henry VIII, the patronage was in the gift of the Lord Chancellor up to the end of the nineteenth century when the Archbishop of York became patron. On the union with Flaxton in 1937, he then alternated with Durham Dean and Chapter which can complicate life for churchwardens during an interregnum!

Of the original pre-Conquest church nothing obvious remains today. What we have now is a building substantially the same in appearance – except for the modern north aisle – as it was when it was completely rebuilt between 1130 and 1140. Further rebuilding was carried out in the thirteenth and in the fifteenth centuries – rededication was postponed for three years in 1287 because work was ongoing – so that only some parts of the twelfth century structure remain. These parts are the chancel arch, the south doorway, and portions of the south walls of the nave and chancel.

In 1427 the church had fallen into such a poor state of repair that there had to be a papal relaxation for ten years until restoration work could be completed. The rector then, one Thomas Brygman, told the Pope that the building was so ruinous that it even lacked a tower for the decent housing of the bells. He further complained that work on the church could not proceed with any haste due to the demands of the king in both taxes and manpower to support the king's wars. It is a quizzical thought that had manpower and money been used to build a tower at Foston church, early in the fifteenth century, we might not have won the Battle of Agincourt! However, there are clear signs of the work that was carried out at this time, and these include the west wall of the nave above the plinth with the window in it, and two windows in the south wall (much renewed later).

Subsequent restoration work saw a reroofing in 1715, new pews and probably the gallery provided in 1794-1796, the chancel enhanced in 1885-1886 and the major work of 1911-1912 when the church was enlarged and an iron mission church was opened in Thornton-le-Clay.

## The South Doorway

Architecturally this is the most interesting feature of the church. It has a wide band of sculpture between a chamfered hood-mould and a roll moulded arch, terminating in corbels, supported on shafts, the western one being spirally fluted, with the eastern one plain but possibly originally painted in similar style. These spirals, along with the patterns on the arch of cables – flowers or fleurons representing heavenly stars and foliage – all suggest the entrance to a holy place. The details of the carvings are unusual. From the west they run:-

A beast, possibly a lion, with upturned bushy tail between its hind legs and curving over its back.

The conventional Tree of Life and Knowledge surmounted by a human head with long ears; on each side is an animal, probably a bull and a horse, with underneath a wheel denoting the everlasting contest which is waged on earth.

A figure in a long gown, either turning a somersault or dancing, with a sword, before another figure playing a harp, possibly David.

A horseman with a lance at rest and a dragon.

The Agnus Dei holding a cross, facing a winged angel.

The Last Supper, Our Lord seated with three Apostles on each side, and with loaves and cups on the table.

A demon, a seated man holding scales and a kneeling man with a fleuron of light behind him, depicting the weighing of a soul.

A centaur with a bow shooting at possibly a fox on the back of a goose, an allegory of the harrowing of hell.

A monster demon, holding a rod from which is suspended a basket containing a human head, stabbing a traveller with a walking stick: Death catching Man unawares.

Two draped figures, wrestling Cumberland style: Man's life-long inner struggle.

Another lion with a bushy tail curving over its back.

The whole scheme might be summarised as teaching the baptised way to heaven. However one interprets their symbolism, these carvings are certainly a rare and intriguing example of twelfth century work in stone.

There is also a crude mass dial on the west side of the doorway.

## The South Door

The door may well be contemporary with its surround. It has three originally split-curl iron straps with an edging band round the top, two large iron strap hinges, and a wooden box lock on the inside containing a probably locally-made Banbury lock of c1750. The foot of the door was skilfully repaired in probably 1911 when the floor of the church and the porch were reconstructed and when the door may also have been moved to inside the frame. Even its original position seems hardly to have been thought through as the surround has been mutilated to accommodate it.

## The Chancel Arch

Original twelfth century, about 1130s, a semi-circular roll-moulded arch resting on scalloped capitals, supported by two orders on the western side, and one on the eastern. The capitals may well be later replacements, possibly even of 1885, made to match those on the south doorway as they are of a different stone to the rest of the work; a plainer round capital that they may have replaced is still stored in the north aisle.

## The Chancel

The east window, the only stained glass in the church, is a memorial made in 1885 by Ward and Hughes to Fanny Selina Cholmeley Simpson (died 1877), the wife of the Reverend Francis Simpson, rector 1856 to 1908; the lower parts of the exterior jambs are original medieval work.

In the north wall is a deep-set lancet window with rounded head internally, probably twelfth century. The window in the south wall may well originally have matched it, and then been enlarged in the thirteenth century version (?1287), and much renewed later (?1885).

An old thirteenth century priest's door in the south wall has been walled up, but the skew-cut door in the north wall into the modern vestry is interesting as it has been cut at an angle through the deep wall, perhaps to accommodate choir stalls, and is probably of twelfth century date.

The aumbry in the east wall may be thirteenth century work, likewise the arched opening in the south wall which has been called a sedilia. This is interesting. The back is diaper plasterwork with scrolls and birds introduced. Its date is a mystery; twelfth or thirteenth or seventeenth century? Both openings may even be creations of 1885-6 when the chancel was enhanced with its east window repaired and the floor decoratively tiled.

Set high in the north and south chancel walls near the east end are two very unusual acoustic pots. These are narrow-necked jars fixed on their sides in the walls to amplify the chancel sound, possibly in the twelfth century. Our medieval builder may have been aware of the use of such pots in ancient Greek and Roman theatres. They do appear occasionally under choir stalls, but here they are clearly to aid the resonation of the priest's voice through the church and they have meant that no sound system has been necessary here!

## The Nave

There is gutter tabling round the north and south walls of the nave. The two two-light windows are fifteenth century, much renewed in 1911. The deep west window is a good example of fifteenth century work and was probably inserted when the west wall was completely rebuilt about 1427. In the lower stone of the northern jamb is the head of an incised thirteenth century floriated cross.

Preserved in the nave, near the organ, is a small twelfth century pillar piscina with a square fluted bowl on a cable-moulded necking, set on an octagonal stem with chevron and palmette leaves ornamentation; also the voussoir of an arch with zigzag moulding and an eight petalled rose, and part of a medieval floriate cross grave slab (three more bits of medieval grave slabs are outside propped against the west wall). The Wray family provided the brass eagle lectern in 1912.

Traces of the possibly once all-pervasive paintings survive as red smudges on the south wall round the doorway.

#### Old North doorway

This has a plain twelfth century semicircular arch and jambs and has been built into the new north wall of the north aisle; it was of course originally in the north wall of the nave.

#### The Pulpit

A pulpit was erected during the fifteenth century restoration, but the present one is probably later eighteenth century. Sydney Smith added its sounding board, which was stripped of its decorative brattishing in 1911.

#### The Font

This is coeval with the church built in around the 1130s, although the lead lining has obviously been much repaired over the centuries. The simple, elegant cover is probably later seventeenth century.

#### The Bells

These are medieval, and only two in number. They were rehoused in a wooden bell-cote at the instigation of Sydney Smith at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and were again rehoused in a stone bell-gable in the 1911 restoration when one of them was recast.