

St Oswald's Church Tower Project

Askrigg



September 2022

Introduction

Askrigg is a parish in Upper Wensleydale in the North Yorkshire Dales National Park. Within the village, in an elevated position, is St Oswald's church, a Grade I listed building, constructed in local stone, with parts of the building dating from the 12th century.

The church is of traditional design, with a tower situated at the west end of the building. The tower, which is accessed only by an external entrance on the tower's north side, contains a peel of 6 bells, houses the village clock, which has chimed the hour for many centuries and has a flagpole on the roof.

The tower has been found to be damp over many years, but the amount of dampness has accelerated in recent years. The predominant direction for wind and rain in the Dale is from the west, hitting the tower, which is in a raised and exposed position. At a Quinquennial Inspection in 2014, the full extent of the problem was revealed, and consideration was given as to remedial action.



Inside the tower

The History of the Tower

The church of St Oswald was first built on this site between 1175 and 1205. In the 15th century, as the village of Askrigg grew and increased in stature, plans were made to enlarge the church and most of the present building is from this period. The building work commenced, with the creation of south aisle in 1446. A little while later, probably in the 1460s the tower was built, topped with a battlemented parapet.

The walls of the building, including the tower, made of hard Dales Flagstone, from the quarries 4 miles away on Stags Fell, above the village of Sedbusk and Simonstone.

The tower has four plain walls, uninterrupted by stringcourses or drips (except at parapet level). On the east wall the tower abuts the nave roof.



There are some simple openings, which are generally small with chamfered jambs and quoins. A larger west window has an arched head. On the north side, the stair turret abuts the stone walling.

In 1853 a faculty was granted for considerable alterations and repairs to the whole church. The tower was also repointed at the same time as the mortar is identical to that used in the clerestory and elsewhere in the church.

The tower has three levels – the ringing chamber, the clock chamber and the belfry,

Purpose and Importance of the Tower

Importance

The tower has been a feature of the village for nearly 600 years. Its visibility in the heart of the village makes it important historically by association with many events and people who have lived in the area and to those who currently live in the village.

From the south, the tower can be seen plainly from the A684, across the river Ure against the backdrop of the Ellerkin escarpment. For those who live and work here, the sight of the tower is a reminder that home is nearby. For those on the fells above it – Ellerkin or Whitfield – the tower acts as a compass home.

In all but the worst of the winter weather, the Union flag, or the cross of St George, flutters from the flagpole atop the tower, catching the eye on a bright summer day.

Purpose

It is interesting to speculate about the original purpose of the tower when its construction was proposed, bearing in mind it probably did not house bells or a clock for nearly two centuries after construction. Its entrance, separate to the church, gives rise to the suggestion that it could have been used for more earthly pursuits than the rest of the church building. For example, was the roof used to house a beacon? Could it have been used as a place of refuge or for the storage of agricultural tithes? These are questions that at present we do not have any answers.

The Bells

There is no evidence of any bells in the tower prior to the mid-17th century. The current bells were installed in the tower in two phases. The original 3 bells were cast in 1657 and likely installed shortly thereafter. These three bells are:

- the 'small bell' which has incised on it '*Jesus be our spede 1657*' which weighs 7cwt and rings the note B;
- the 'middle bell' which has '*God save His church 1657*' incised on it which weighs 8cwt and rings A;
- the tenor bell, which has '*All ye that hear my mournful sound repent before you lye in the ground 1657*'. It weighs 10cwt and rings G.

In 1831, a proposal was made to increase the number of bells, but this was defeated at a church meeting, and it was not until 1897 that the above bells were recast, and three new ones purchased.

Each of the existing bells has 'recast 1897' on them and the tenor bell has an added inscription which says:

Cast by John Warner & Sons Ltd, London 1897

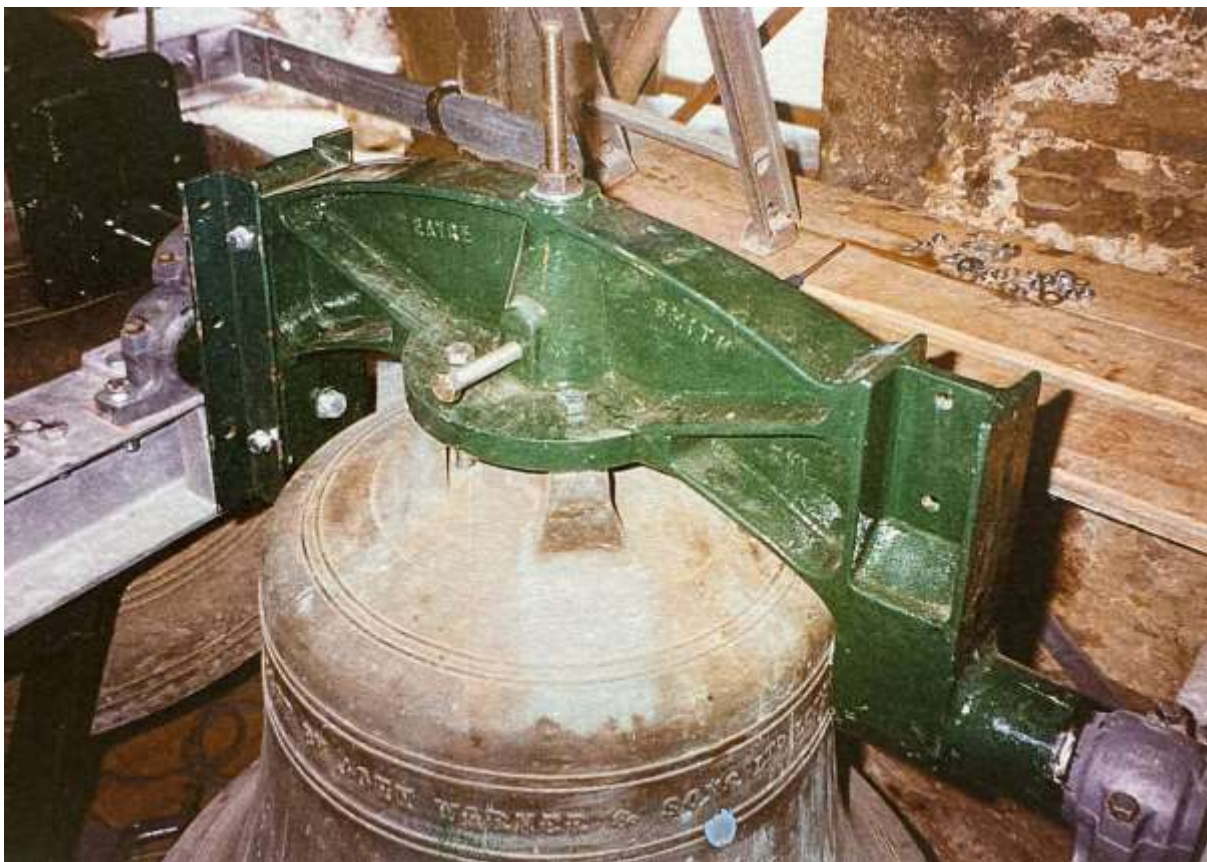
Thomas Mallaby & Sons, Church Bell Hanger, Masham

The three new bells are:

- the treble bell, which has the inscription '*in memory of Thomas & Jane Lodge. This bell was dedicated by their sons and daughters 1897*'. It weighs 4cwt and rings E;
- the second bell, which has the inscription '*in memory of George & Elizabeth Winn. This bell was erected by their son James C Winn 1897*'. It weighs 5cwt and rings D;
- the third bell, which has the inscription '*this peal of bells was recast in Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee 1897. C Whaley, Vicar; WEM Winn, E Chapman, G Bell, Churchwardens*'. It weighs 6cwt and rings C.

All bells are inscribed with 'to the glory of God'

When the bells were hung by Thomas Mallaby, they were hung in an oak frame and in such a way that they all swung in the same direction which resulted in an uneven distribution of stress on the walls of the tower when ringing. By 1990 it was



recognised that work needed to be done to remedy this and to replace the lead on the roof with stainless steel to match the rest of the church. The £35,000 needed was

raised from donations and the work was carried out between January and April 1992. The bells and the old frame were taken down along with the clock room floor and gradually the new frame was installed, together with new louvres on the windows and floor to the clock chamber. The bells were then rehung in a different way to reduce the stress on the walls.



The bells are rung on a regular basis by a group of dedicated bellringers. In the past ringers have come from other parishes to ring the bells, but this has become less frequent due to the state of the tower.

The extreme dampness of the tower has led to the rotting of the bell ropes and the ringing chamber to be coated in green algae. The wood panelling has rotted, and conditions are not conducive to spending any time there.

The Clock

We cannot be certain when the first clock was fixed in the church tower. However, church records state that in 1749 that the clock was 'so very old' and in such a bad state of repair that the church wanted to raise money for a new one. It has been suggested that the original clock may have been installed at the same time as the original bells. It should be remembered that Askrigg in the 18th century was renown as a centre for clock making.

Many of the prominent locals - Thomas Metcalfe, Simon Pratt, Margaret Lightfoot, George Metcalfe, Jeffrey Wood and George Calvert, together with clockmaker's wife



Mary Pratt of Camshouses were among the largest contributors. The 'new' clock cost £18 16s and remained in place for just over 100 years, until a replacement was made in 1854 and that in turn was replaced with the current clock in 1902, when assistance from a Leeds company was required as no clockmaker remained in Askrigg.

The clock is maintained by Cumbria Clocks, who also maintain and repair Big Ben at the Houses of Parliament. Their visits have become more frequent as the damp continues to seep into the clock mechanism.

The Works Planned

Our church architect, Andrew Boyce from Ferrey & Mennim, York, inspected the tower in 2014 and on subsequent occasions. All Anglian churches are required to appoint a Church Architect (from their list) and Andrew has been in post at St Oswald's since 2013. Andrew, (BSc DipArch ARB RIBA RIAS AABC), is the cathedral architect for St Magnus Cathedral and Hull Minster as well as over 180 churches, mainly in Northern England.

His inspections have shown that the walls are heavily cement pointed, particularly on the north side. Fine cracks and bedding plane fractures are also evident in the hard walling stone which will allow capillary penetration of moisture running down the stone surface into the core of the wall.

Internal inspection of the tower confirms signs of significant water ingress into the wall core and interior surfaces. In the base of the tower, which is inside the church, the stone ribs of the vaulted ceiling have green algae staining and are noticeably damp and the adjoining plasterwork is also stained from above. The ringing chamber is similarly affected, and the panelling has been rotted by the damp. The floor timbers are a concern. The belfry is shows similar algae staining and damp walls. The internal woodwork including stairways will need to be reassessed due to the damp.

Experts were contacted by the architect, including the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), Historic England and the National Park. Historic England, in particular, had a research project into the problems of water penetration in solid masonry walls, particularly in tall buildings in exposed situations. The prevalence of church towers within the study has led to it becoming known as the 'Damp Towers' Project.

It was found that removing all hard impervious cement-based pointing and render and the use of vapour/moisture permeable products in their place has produced the best outcomes. It was further found that pointing and rendering produced the most noticeable effects.

Grouting has proved less effective because it is more difficult to control and install and the act of infilling voids in the mass wall may have negative effects with regard to retention of moisture. Re-pointing alone has not been found to be effective as the walling stones were hard and impervious stone types, meaning that all of the work to prevent the moisture entering the wall and to evaporate and transmit moisture out of the structure was being done at the mortar joints.

The proposed work to the tower has three phases – phase one is to stop the ingress of water by completing works to the outside of the tower and essential works to the inside. Phase two is the period needed for the internal tower to dry out and the final phase is the internal repairs and refurbishment.

Phase one, supported by Historic England, SPAB and the National Park, is to:

- remove the current cement pointing from all elevations of the tower,
- to deep tamp and if necessary gallet wide joints and small holes with pinnings of rough-cut stone (of matching type)
- to re-point the walls in feebly hydraulic lime mortar (NHL2) or lime putty mix which will be kept back from the general face of the elevation to provide a key for the render.
- Walls to be rendered using lime in an agreed mix incorporating either a non-hydraulic putty and/or as a hot mix which will include carefully sourced aggregates and sand to provide a base colour finish.
- The tower will then be limewashed over the whole surface
- The render will be applied in two layers to achieve a consistent minimum thickness. The final render will be finished to allow some of the aggregate to show. It will follow the natural contours of the elevations. Projecting stones may be left uncovered or just limewashed.

Joanne Needham of SPAB said that they were *'pleased to support this project to repoint and render the tower. Ferrey & Mennim and the PCC are to be applauded for their informed approach'*

Both Andrew Boyce and consulting master stone mason Matthias Garn are convinced that the external aspect of the church and tower were rendered in the past.

The reasons for this are that evidence of render is still visible, particularly on the upper parts of the tower and the written evidence on the faculty application for the 1853/54 repairs which includes the statement *'dismantled stone to be cleaned of limewash and render'*. The Yorkshire Vernacular Buildings Study Group also support this theory. When asked to comment, they said *'The exterior walls of the church were almost certainly rendered or limewashed at one time, as were most buildings until the later 19th century, when it became the fashion to remove any render and expose the stonework'*.

Matthias has worked as a mason and carver for over 30 years. He has an MA in Historic Conservation from University of York. He was awarded a Master Craftsman Certificate from the Worshipful Company of Masons and is currently their Champion. He is a Freeman of the City of London. He currently sits on the Historic Estates Conservation Committee of Historic England and runs his own successful business, employing a number of other masons.



Test patches on south wall

An article was printed in the Darlington & Stockton Times on Friday 25th January 2019, outlining the problem and the intended solution. The D&S interviewed Parish Council Chairman Bruce Fawcett, who said *'It needs looking after. If it was rendered before then personally, I don't think anything else can be done. It might look a bit odd for a few years, but it will settle down and I don't see there is an alternative. You have our support for what you are proposing'*.

The minutes of the Parish Council meeting January 2019 record that they *'gave the PCC their full support in carrying out the necessary works'*

The application for the works was passed by the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority on 4th July 2019.

The planning application was passed by Askrigg Parish Council at their meeting on 17th July 2019, with no objection.

The Diocese of Leeds granted a Faculty for the work on 24th October 2019, which was extended by a further two years in September 2022.

Unfortunately, Covid has delayed the fund raising on the project, and some of the preparatory works. However, since Spring 2022, fund raising efforts have recommenced and two sample patches, to show the texture and type of mix have been applied to the South and West walls. The National Park's Historic Buildings Officer, Gaby Rose, has inspected the patches and these have fulfilled the requirements of the Planning Permission.

A further patch is due to be applied in a colour more matched to the stone.

The church has tried to keep the parish informed of what is happening to the tower, including the reasons behind the project. In addition to the statutory notices required as part of the planning permission processes for both the National Park and the Faculty, there have been articles in the local newspapers, parish newsletter and various meetings and briefings; the latest was on 29th July at the Church, when villagers were invited to look at the patches and ask questions of Andrew Boyce, Matthias Garn and Gaby Rose, all of whom were in attendance. Most of the Parish Council were also there. Feedback and comments were requested on the patches, via the village Facebook messenger group and by notices. Every annual Parish Meeting has reported on the project and its progress.

To date, the church has not received any letters objecting to the plan. However, there are a number of voices within the community who remain unhappy with the decision to render and the PCC remains committed to listening to all stakeholder opinions.

As yet, no contract has been entered into for this work.

It is intended to hold a meeting in the near future for residents to hear again the reason for the project and a chance to ask questions from the experts involved.

As part of the project, but somewhat distinct from the building work, we wish to ensure that we leave good historical records about the tower and the work uncovered by the project and covered up by it. It is hoped to secure the service of an archaeological historian who will take on the work on this project.

The main brief will be:

- To be present on site during the external and internal works
- To record, identify, conserve and store any artifacts uncovered during the work, including core samples of mortar and stone and radiocarbon dating where appropriate
- To research documentation in all relevant archives and stores to try to find documentary evidence regarding the tower.
- To source people who have worked or used the tower over the last century and record and preserve this oral history.
- To create a timeline for the tower
- To produce illustrations of the tower at various points in its history, to enable the public to be able to see and understand its construction and adaptations throughout its history.
- To create a short documentary film about the tower
- To curate a small permanent exhibition about the tower, which will include items found during the work and the documentary.

Once the tower is completely restored, it is anticipated that there will be a large increase in the number of visiting ringers to ring the bells; that guided lecture tours

can be given of the bell and clock chambers and that the exhibition will better explain our heritage.

Timings

It is clearly understood that the project is likely to take 2-3 years

Test patches on July 2022

The patches will be left on for almost a year to see how they perform and how the colour mellows. Regular inspection will take place and other patches may be added if considered necessary.

Work commences Summer 2023

Old cement mortar cleared out and tower repointed, rendered and limewashed.

Drying period Summer 2023-summer 2024

Phase two: The tower is expected to require a year in order to sufficiently dry out following the external rendering. Equipment may be required to speed up the process. During the drying time (or before if funds and use of the tower permits) the internal joist and woodwork will be examined and removed if found unsafe and costings obtained for the internal refurbishment. A faculty for this work will be required.

Internal works Summer 2024 or when deemed appropriate

Phase three of the project will involve the refurbishment of the tower. Further grant funding will be required. This will also involve the base of the tower, which is open to the church.

Funding

A significant amount of money has been raised by local fundraising and a local charity has kindly donated £30,000 and has pledged a further £90,000 more over the coming three years. The current total in the bank stands at £110,000 and together with the pledged £90,000 gives a total of £200,000. Nevertheless, there is still a large amount outstanding and grant applications will need to be made to reach the target.