

## **The Cross Slabs of St Martin's Church, Kirklevington**

Cross slabs, as their name implies, are recumbent grave stones which generally bear a full-length cross. They are usually the size and shape of a coffin lid but may equally well have served as a grave marker above a burial. Along with other types of monument, they were already in widespread use before the Norman Conquest; as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century Kenneth, King of Scotland, had decreed 'esteem every sepulchre or gravestone sacred, and adorn it with the sign of the cross...'. However, the Kirklevington slabs with which this report is concerned are of medieval, ie post-1066 date.

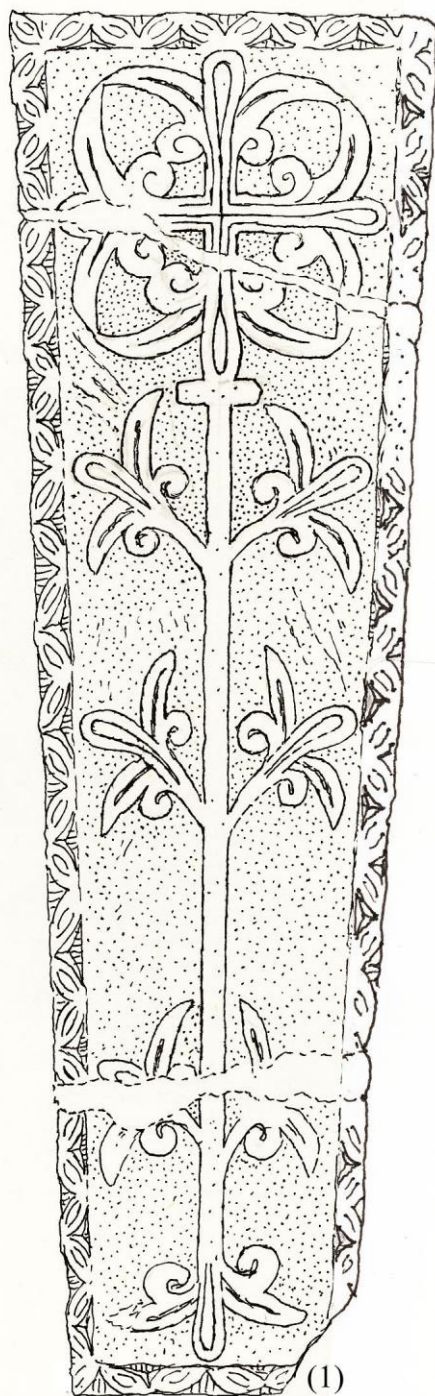
Their crosses, often of ornate and very beautiful form, are the usual means by which the slabs can be dated, and were often accompanied by emblems giving some information as to the rank or occupation of the deceased. By far the most common emblems are the sword (male, probably the right to bear arms) and shears (female, the 'badge of office' of the housewife) followed by the chalice and book of the priest. Inscriptions are far less common.

Cross slabs use reached its peak in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries; after this other monuments types such as brasses and effigies become popular, at least for the higher ranks in society. The use of cross slabs continued, at a level rather hard to ascertain, until snuffed out abruptly in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the political and religious storms of the Reformation.

The slabs were used both inside churches, either set in recesses or as part of the floor, or outside in the churchyard. Very few remain in their original positions today (usually in excavated medieval cemeteries, as at some abbeys and priories); the vast majority have been re-used at some time as building material, so in dating them one is heavily dependant on their designs. As at Kirklevington, many were retrieved from the fabric in which they had been re-used during 19<sup>th</sup>-century restorations, and set in new walls so that they could be appreciated by future generations.

Some areas of the country are far richer than others in monuments of this type; an important factor is the ready availability of a suitable freestone. The Tees Valley and Cleveland are especially rich; even so, the collection at Kirklevington is one of the best in the area, in terms both of number of the slabs and their degree of preservation; nearby, Ingleby Greenhow, Kildale and Whorlton all have a considerable number of slabs, but many are badly eroded or fragmentary.

The slabs at Kirklevington are here described in the order in which one might see them when visiting the church:



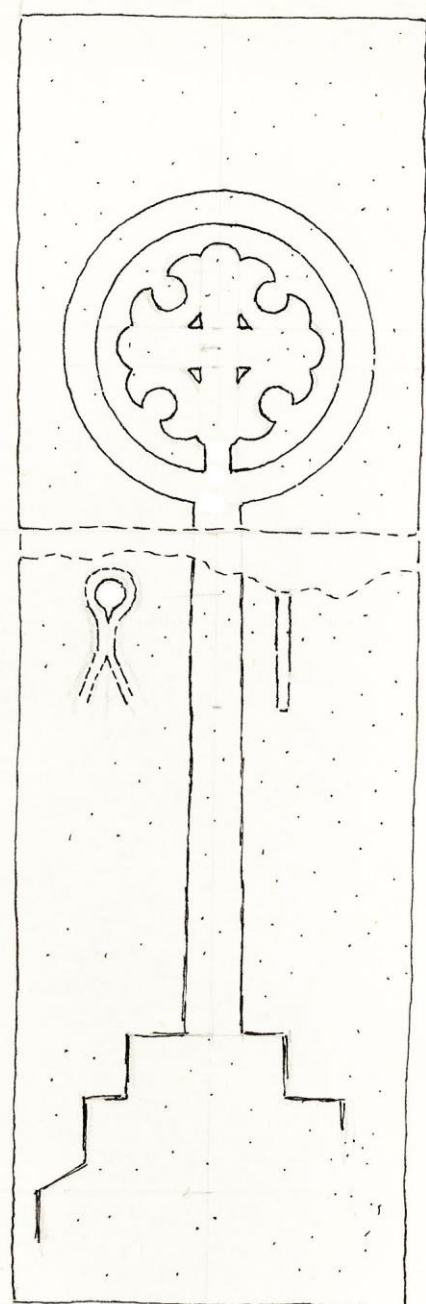
0

50 cm

(1)

Slab built into the west wall of the south porch. Whilst most of the Kirklevington slabs were found in the 1883 restoration, a pre-restoration photograph of the church shows this stone as set upright against the east wall of the nave, to the south of the chancel arch. A complete slab (although cracked into three pieces) of medium-grained buff sandstone, carved in high relief. The cross, boldly but slightly asymmetric, has big fleur-de-lis terminals and three pairs of similar fleur-de-lis spring from the shaft, whilst another forms the base. The chamfer around the slab is carved with running-leaf ornament.

This is a fine example of a floriated cross, sometimes termed a 'cross fleury'; the symbolism is clearly that of the cross as the Tree of Life. Ascribing it a date is more difficult; none of the detail is closely datable. It could be as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but some motifs such as the running leaf reappear at different times in history.



(2)

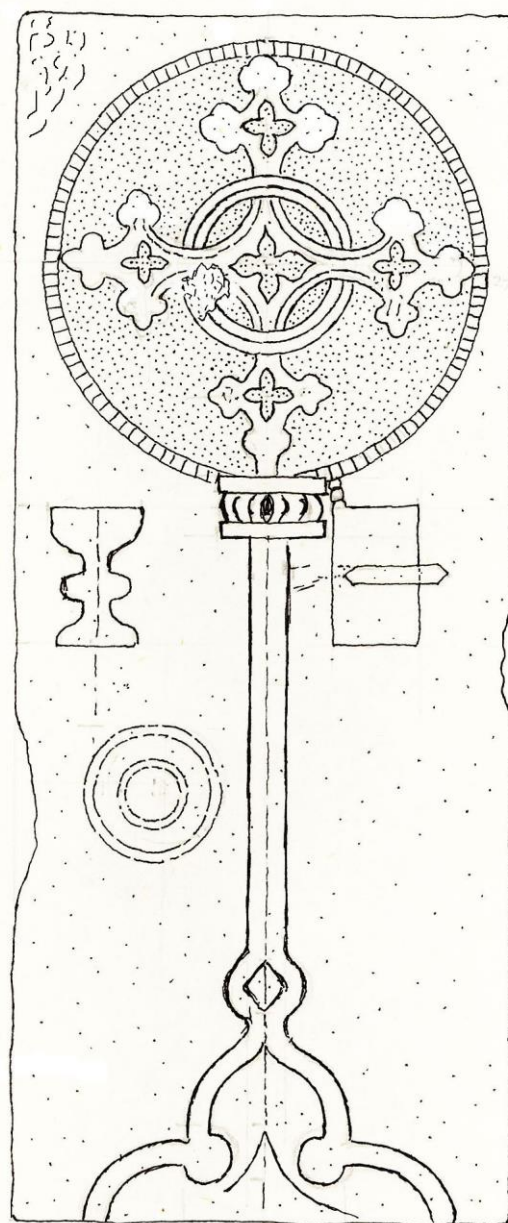
0

50 cm

(2) Slab built into the east wall of the south porch. A rectangular slab, suggesting use as a floor-stone, ie as part of the pavement within the church. The stone is a light buff one, which has been whitewashed at some time. The incised design is now quite faint. The cross head has thick 'bracelets' set on a central cross, creating in effect fleur-de-lys terminals (although quite unlike those of slab 1), and is enclosed within a ring; it rises from a conventional but rather irregular stepped base, and on either side is an emblem. That on the left has a loop, and may be intended to represent a pair of shears; that on the right, damaged by a break in the slab, is less clear, but might have been a key – shears and key occur together (notably in Northumberland) on womens' memorials. Perhaps 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century.

- (3) This is set into the internal face of the north wall of the chancel, at its west end, and is a rectangular slab of a fine-grained creamy buff stone, probably a sandstone. The design is incised, except for the cross head which is carved in relief within a sunk circular panel ringed by a simple beading. The cross is a variant on the common form made up of four open 'bracelets' or quadrants, with elaborate terminals which are each a cruciform arrangement of three trefoils with an open quatrefoil, and there is another ogival quatrefoil at the head centre, which is enclosed by a ring that interlaces alternately in front of and behind the arms. The cross rises from quite an elaborate trefoiled base, with abroad knop just below the head; at the top of the shaft there is a chalice on the left and a clasped book on the right, the usual emblems of a priest. A third and less common priestly emblem, a paten (two concentric rings) is more lightly incised below the chalice. The slab is well preserved – the original mason's setting-out lines are still visible in the centre of cross shaft and chalice – but there is active spalling of the surface of the stone at its top left-hand corner which is beginning to threaten the carved design and requires immediate attention.

This is arguably the most important of the Kirklevington slabs, and is of a 'floor stone' type uncommon in North Yorkshire, of a later medieval form (14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century) that tended to be produced at 'workshops' and then exported. A detailed analysis of the stone might provide information as to its origin.



(3)

0 50 cm

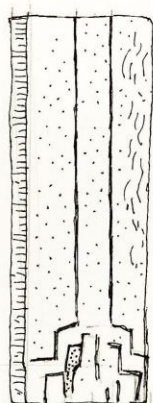
## The Vestry

Slabs 4-8 are built into the internal face of the west wall of the vestry, 9 – 15 into the north wall and 16-22 into the east wall. At the time of survey heavy furniture (in particular a massive and immovable safe at the north-west corner), made some of the slabs difficult to examine.

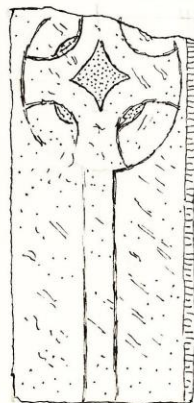
## The West Wall

- (4) South end of north wall, c 1.5 m above the floor. The lower part of a slab of olive sandstone, with a chamfer on its left edge; is this one side of a coped slab? Incised cross shaft and stepped base, with some motif, difficult to make sense of, beneath the base.
- (5) Adjacent to (4), the upper part of a slab of buff sandstone with incised design (except for sunk panel at the head centre). Cross of four quadrants, with a ring between the arms. Perhaps 12<sup>th</sup> century.
- (6) In the centre of the wall 1.2 m above the floor. Upper part of a slab of coarse-grained buff sandstone with the head carved in relief within a sunk circular panel, but the remainder of the design incised. The stylised cross is an attractive flower-like form with six lenticular loops as arms and a ring interlacing through them, and two pair of large lobed leaves spring from the cross shaft, which has a pair of shears to the left.
- (7) Higher up in the centre of the wall is a brown sandstone slab set horizontally, more or less intact although there is some damage to its left side. The head, carved in relief within a sunk panel, is a simpler flower-like form, an eight-petalled 'marigold' within a circle; the incised cross shaft unusually stops just short of the head, and rises from a simple two-stepped base; shears on the left of the shaft.
- (8) At the north end of the wall 1.5 m above the floor, the lower half of a slab of medium-grained brown sandstone. Incised design; cross shaft, with one pair of trefoil leaves, rising from a stepped base with what looks like a smaller bifurcate leaf beneath

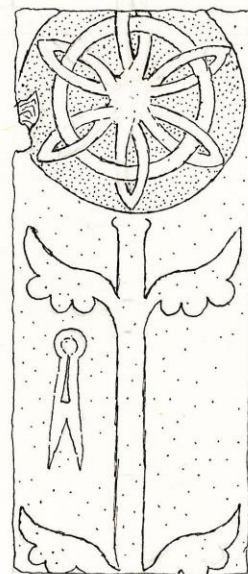




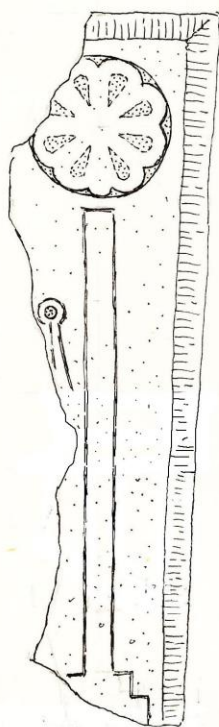
(4)



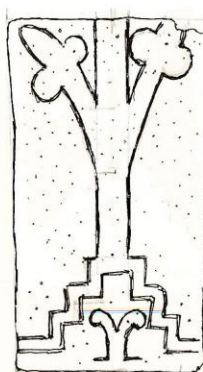
(5)



(6)



(9)



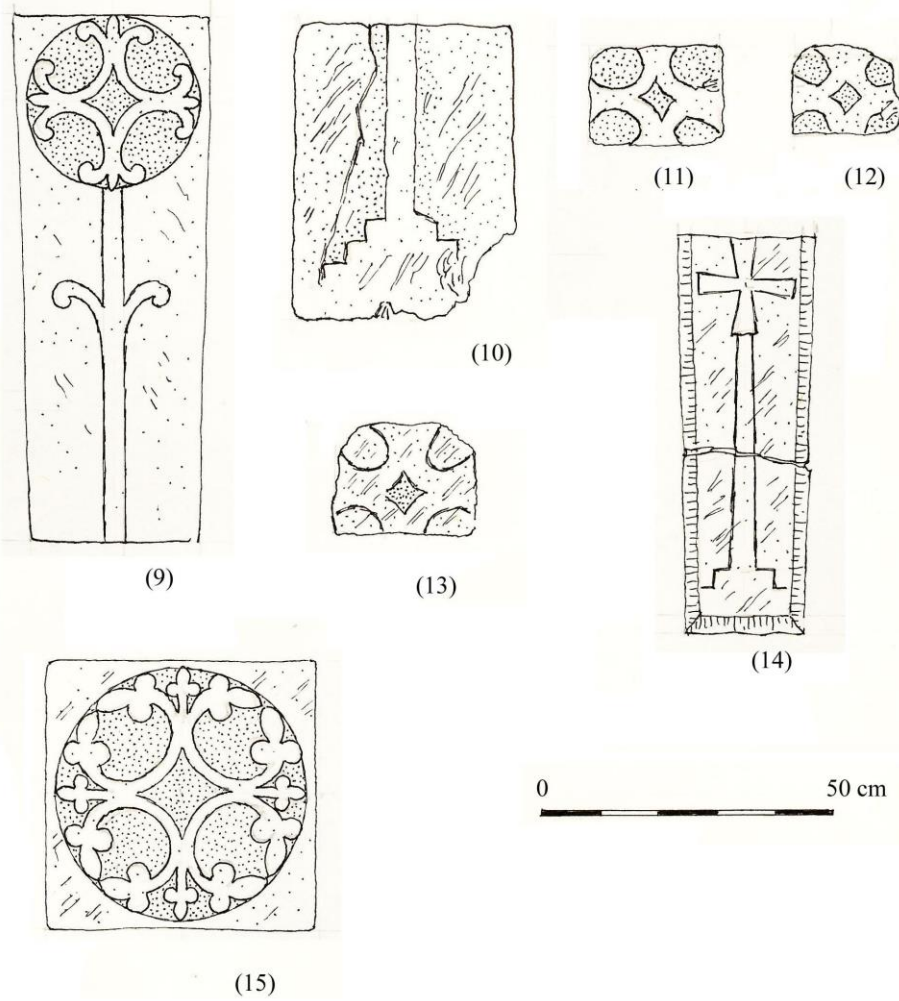
(8)

0 50 cm

Kirklevington: Slabs in the West Wall of the Vestry

## The North Wall

- (9) At the west end of the wall, set horizontally 1 m above the floor, and only visible with difficulty by squinting obliquely behind the safe. Sandstone slab with an open bracelet cross head carved in relief within a sunk circle, and incised cross slab with a single pair of round-leaf 'buds' midway down; the base is missing. The cross head made up of four broken circles or 'bracelets' (here with round-leaf ends and lenticular 'buds' between) is a very common one but, despite the attempts of one researcher in the 1950s to link it to the cult of the Sacred Bracelet of St Bega, seems simply to be a stylistic motif with a long pedigree stretching back into the Pre-Conquest period.
- (10) Lower part of a pink/orange slab in the centre of the wall c 1.2 m above the floor, and re-set upside down. Relief design, decaying, of stepped cross base and shaft; an incised line of the right of the shaft might be a remnant of some emblem.
- (11)–(13) In the eastern part of the wall, 1 m above the floor (and alongside the well-known Anglo-Saxon 'hart and hound' stone) are three almost identical small stones, all apparently small headstones with crosses (two in relief, once incised) made up of four quadrants with a lozenge at the head centre. Small headstones like this are quite common in Cleveland (eg Bilsdale) and would have been placed upright at the head (or foot – ex-situ, footstones are indistinguishable) of a grave in the churchyard.
- (14) Intact small slab of pink/orange sandstone set between the two windows. Incised design, simple cross with slightly-expanded arms rising from stepped base.
- (15) In the centre of the wall 4 m above the floor, the head of a brown sandstone slab with the cross carved in relief within a sunk circular panel. A fine and slightly elaborate version of the common 'bracelet' theme, each terminal becoming a cluster of three trefoils. Probably 13<sup>th</sup> century.

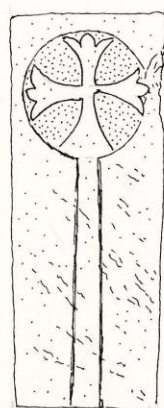


Kirklevington: Slabs in the North Wall of the Vestry

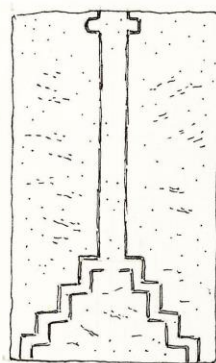


## The East Wall

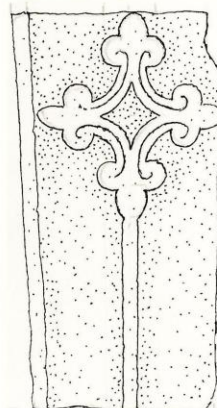
- (16) Near the north end of the wall 1 m above the floor. Buff sandstone slab, lacking its base. Cross with splayed arms and simple trefoil terminals carved in relief within a sunk circle, no emblem.
- (17) In the centre of the wall 1 m above the floor. Lower part of a slab of orange-brown sandstone. Incised design of cross shaft rising from stepped base; the rather unusual treatment of the base, the steps being expressed as by two parallel lines instead of one, is the same as in slab (8)
- (18) At the south end of the wall 1 m above the floor. Upper part of slab of grey-brown sandstone, with a roll-moulded edge, carved in relief. Cross with head of four quadrants and trefoil/fleur-de-lys terminals, a relatively simple but quite elegant form. There is a very similar slab at nearby Crathorne, quite possibly the work of the same mason.
- (19) Near the north end of the wall 2 m above the floor. Upper part of a slab of fine-grained brown sandstone. Cross with slightly-splayed arms, the ends of transverse ones jutting out above the chamfer of the sides of the stone; a more lightly-incised pair of shears (perhaps a later addition?) on the right of the shaft. It would that cross slabs, rarely personalised by an inscription, were quite often re-used, when emblems might quite well be added (cf perhaps the lightly-incised paten on the priest's slab (3).
- (20) In the centre of the wall 2 m above the floor. The upper part of a slab of orange-brown sandstone. Cross of four broken circles with triangular buds, an early form of the 'bracelet' theme, carved in relief within a sunk circle. Unusually broad cross shaft with a deeply incised chalice on the left and a more faintly-incised one (accompanied by two small triangular objects - possibly wafers - below and to the right). The simple cross and broad shaft point to are relatively early (c1100?) date; one can only conjecture why there are two chalices; was a second priest later buried under the stone
- (21) To the south of (20), 2 m above the floor. Mid-section of a slab with incised cross shaft, a single pair of trefoiled leaves, and chamfered edges.
- (22) At south end of wall 2 m above the floor. The lower part of a sandstone slab; cross shaft and stepped base, again of the same rather unusual type seen in (8) and (17).



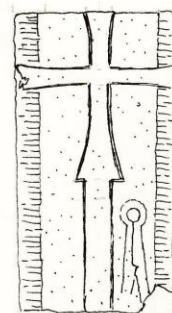
(16)



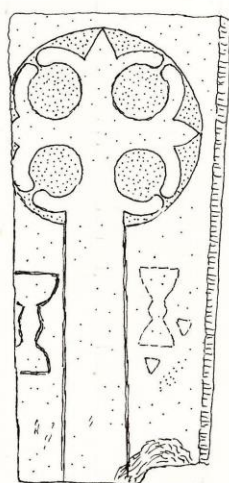
(17)



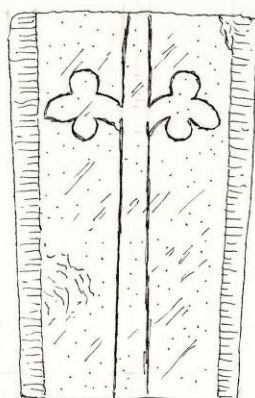
(18)



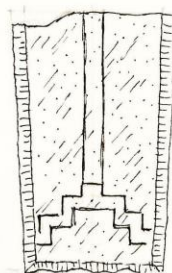
(19)



(20)



(21)



(22)

0 50 cm

Kirklevington: Slabs in the East Wall of the Vestry

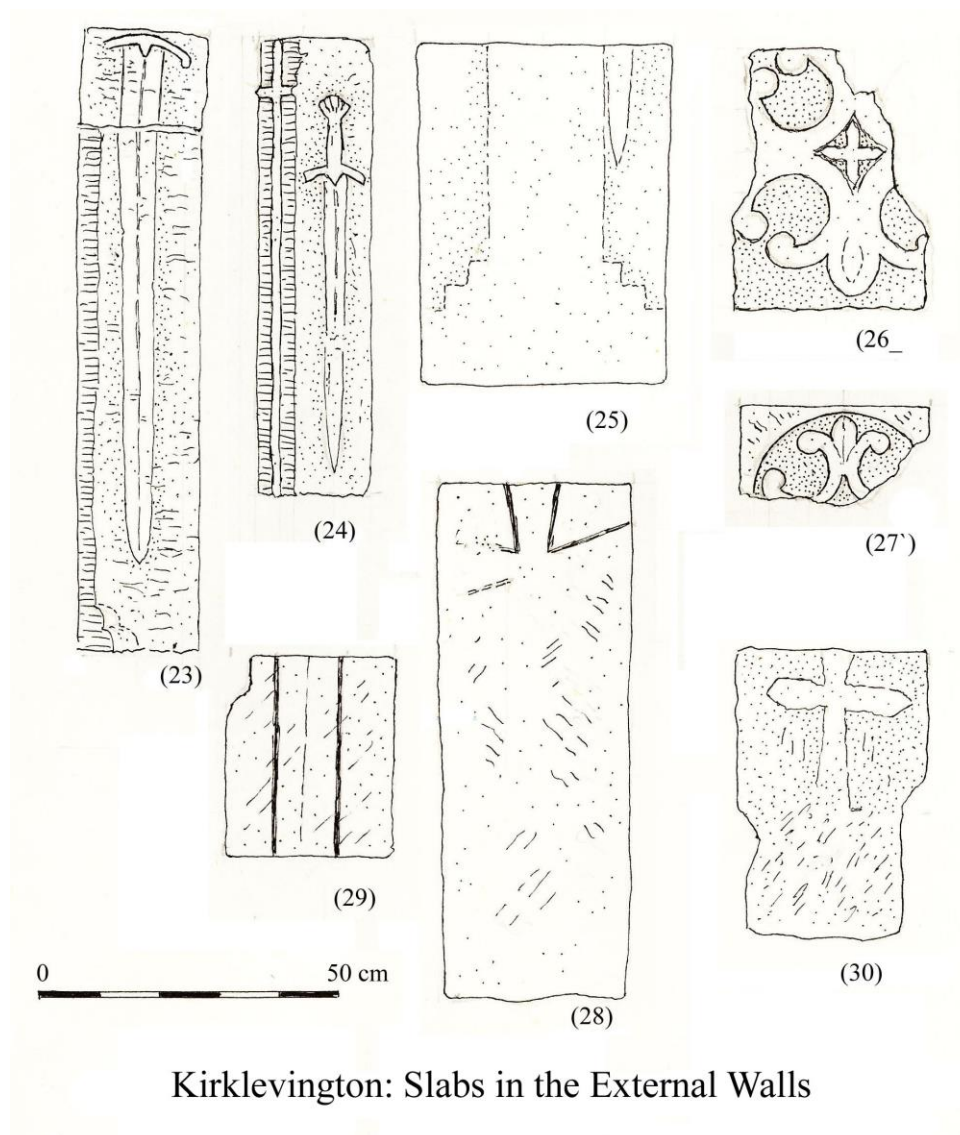
### **Slabs built into the external walls of the church.**

These pieces were also re-set in the 1883 restoration, but obviously considered to be of lesser importance than those placed inside the building.

- (23) In the east end, the lower of two slabs below the central light of the triplet of 19<sup>th</sup>-century lancet windows. Two fragments of a coped slab; the main length has a sword blade (with a central groove) caved in relief, with a chamfered edge adjacent that could either be the central ridge or vertical side of the original monument. The second fragment, set at a slightly different angle, does not have this chamfer, but a more-or-less matching piece of sword with quillons (the horizontal element of the handle) with down-turned ends.
- (24) Set directly above (23) another section of a coped slab. The chamfered lower edge has a slender and simple cross carved in relief, and this must be the ridge of the original monument. The main face is the sloping side of the coped slab, and has a small sword carved in relief, with a multi-lobed pommel of Scandinavian type – a distinctive form that was seen again on the lost slab (31).
- (25) Lower part of slab set in the centre of the north gable end of the vestry, 3 m above the ground, of purplish sandstone. Relief design, now very worn. Stepped base and unusually broad cross shaft, with blade of a sword on the r.

Slabs (26)-(30) are set in the west wall of the vestry.

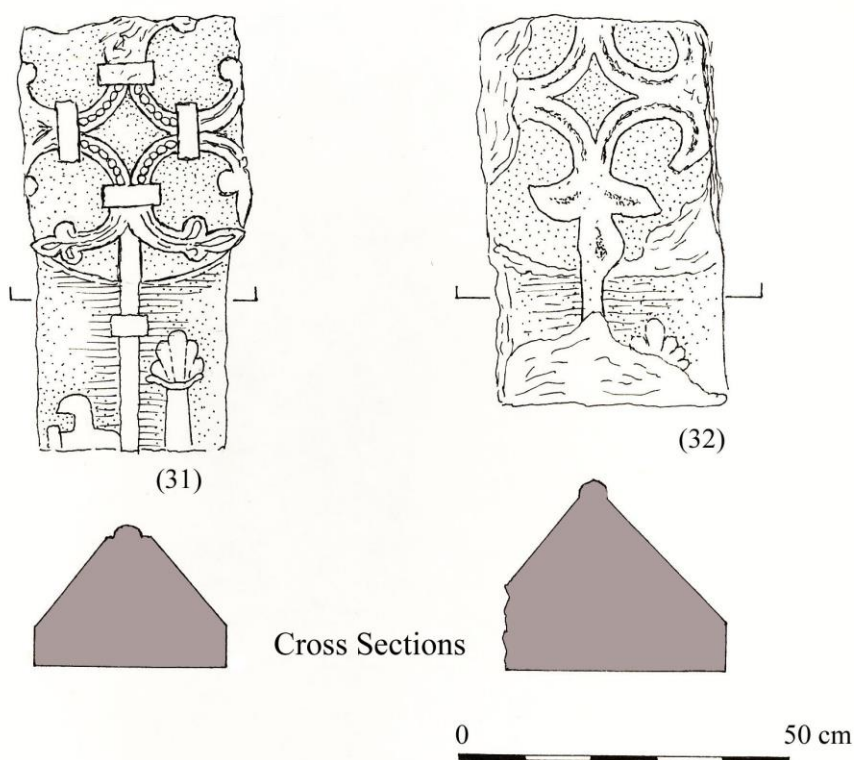
- (26) North end of wall 1.2 m up. Part of the head of a slab of red sandstone; decay over recent years means that the design is now barely visible. Round-leaf bracelet cross (late 12th or early 13<sup>th</sup> century), carved in relief with a small cross at the head centre.
- (27) Immediately south of (26), part of the head of a slab of grey fine-grained sandstone. A rather similar cross head, carved in relief within a sunk circle, but with rather wider openings to its bracelets.
- (28) Set horizontally in the centre of the wall 1.5 m above the floor. Very worn sandstone slab; all that is visible of the incised design is part of the head of a simple splay-armed cross. Early medieval.
- (29) In centre of wall 2 m up. Part of a grey sandstone slab. Incised broad cross shaft with a central setting-out line.
- (30) Near south end of wall 1.5 m up. Slab of olive sandstone, set upside-down, with rather simple but slightly irregular cross with slightly lenticular arms rising from a boss or mount.



Slabs (31) and (32) were sketched by the writer in 1962, when they were noted as being in the churchyard to the south-east of the church, and again in 1981, when they were in the south porch. At some subsequent time they, together with a medieval stone coffin, have been removed by persons unknown.

(31) Upper part of a coped slab with a fine cross head carved in relief on a raised circular panel, of bracelet-derivative form; the bracelets end in fleud-de-lys, and have beaded ornament, and are bound together by four square-ended cross bands. On the coped sides of the slab are r., the hilt of a sword with a five-lobed pommel of Anglo-Scandinavian type (see also slab 24) and on the l.; what looks like the head of a bird. This has been a high-quality stone of 13<sup>th</sup> century date. There is a very similar cross on a section of semi-coped slab, of unknown provenance, now at the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle.

(32) A similar but simpler slab, rather more worn; the cross head is a simpler bracelet form, and on the coped r. side the lobed pommel of a sword is just visible.



Kirklevington: Coped slabs, now lost

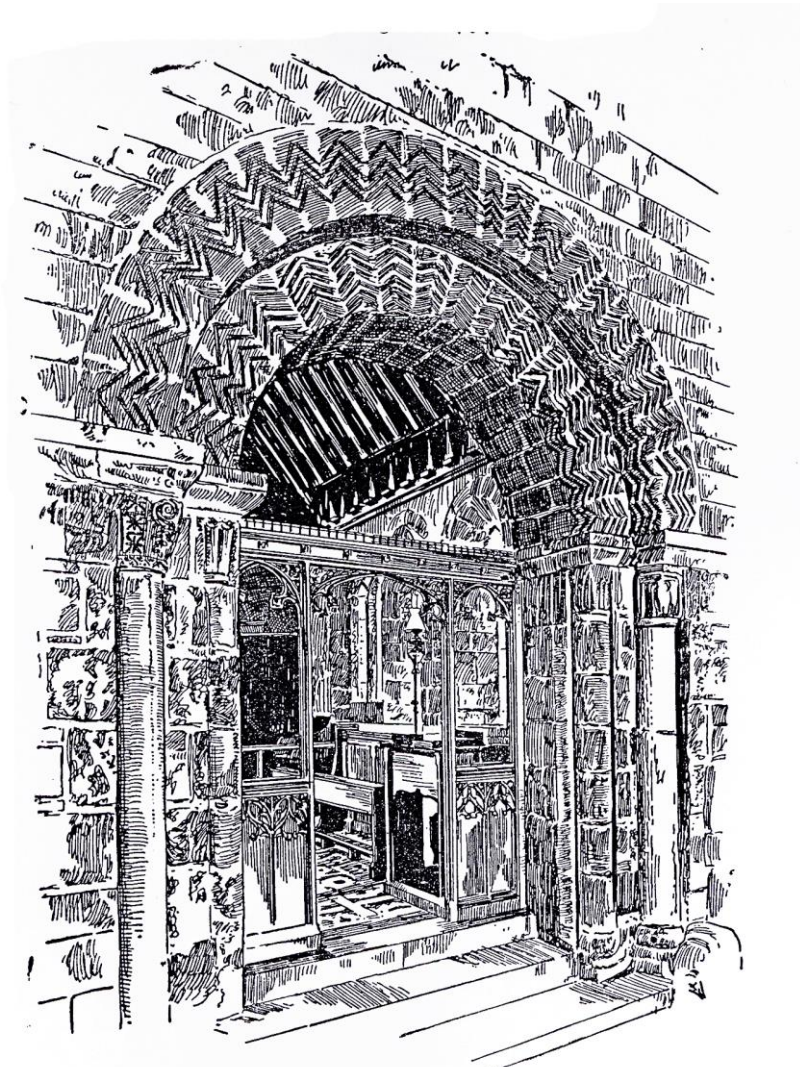
drawn P F Ryder October 1981



### Some General Comments

Most members of this important collection of cross slabs appear to be in relatively good condition, although the worrying decay of the top corner of slab (3) needs to be checked and remedied by a qualified stone conservationist. If they are to be exhibited to the public, as they certainly merit, there is the obvious problem that some of those in the vestry (along with some Pre-Conquest sculptural pieces built into the same walls) are currently concealed by furniture. A second issue is lighting; stones like this, with incised or relief patterns, sometimes faint or badly worn, are best viewed by means of oblique lighting. The incised pattern on slab (3) can barely be seen under normal front-on lighting, but with low-angle oblique illumination is quite clear.

*Peter F Ryder March 2008*



KIRK LEAVINGTON CHURCH : THE CHANCEL ARCH

**Drawing of Chancel Arch from Victoria County History (1923)**



## Appendix 1

### St Martin's Church: The Fabric

St Martin's Church now externally appears as a building of two parts, with a clearly Victorian nave and a medieval chancel, but on entering the visitor finds a good Norman south door and chancel arch. Much has been taken down and rebuilt however, and only a relatively small proportion of the fabric appears to be undisturbed medieval work. As often happens in this area, all traces of the vernacular character typical of most Cleveland churches in the post-medieval period were ruthlessly erased by a high Victorian restoration.

The present nave, together with its south porch and north-eastern vestry<sup>1</sup>, is virtually all of 1883, C N Armfield being the architect, although it is built on the foundations of a predecessor which itself seems to have retained little medieval work – the south wall was said to have been rebuilt in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the north wall was rebuilt in 1859<sup>2</sup>. The 12<sup>th</sup> century south door survived, and was re-set by Armfield; his western bellcote follows the same general style as the previous one (of 17<sup>th</sup> century date?) and the buttresses below it re-use old stone.

The south door has a semicircular arch of two chevron-moulded orders, the chevron also being continued down the jamb of the inner order; the stonework is fairly decayed, and adhering whitewash testifies to their unrestored condition. The imposts are grooved and chamfered beneath. The inner order is carried on attached shafts, with capitals carved with volutes and interlacing foliage; the capital of the outer order on the east has a crude face carved on it, but that on the west is a later block. The detached shafts of the outer order are unusual in being octagonal; the eastern is in two parts, the lower, in browner stone with deep diagonal tooling, is clearly a later repair. The rear arch of the doorway is all of 1883.

The chancel arch is an impressive 12<sup>th</sup> century piece, but like the south door was re-set in 1883 in a new wall, and contrasts with the crisply-cut Victorian Romanesque blind arcade on the wall above. Like the south door it is of two orders with chevron; the two outermost voussoirs of the outer order on each side are clearly Victorian replacements. The imposts, again like those of the south door, are grooved and chamfered on their lower

---

<sup>1</sup> The VCH account seems to suggest that the vestry is a rebuilding of a 14<sup>th</sup> century 'transeptal chapel' but this is an error; pre-1883 plans clearly show that there was no structure in this position.

<sup>2</sup> At the east end of the south wall was a three-light window with flamboyant-style tracery, possibly of 14<sup>th</sup> century date, with further west a window of two round-headed lights of 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup> century character. An old photograph shows a paired lancet in the west end, but an 1860 plan shows no opening here (Marchant, 15); the same plan shows a two-light window at the east end of the north wall and a north door at the west end, with two buttresses between, described in 1835 by the visiting Bishop Macilvaine of Ohio as 'triangular abutments' (ibid, 13). He judged the church as 'a grotesque place of antiquity'

angles. The inner order is carried on attached shafts with fluted capitals and moulded bases, whilst the outer order has carved capitals which, together with carved blocks in the wall face just outside them, form a sequence. From north to south these comprise:

- (1) A lion
- (2) (The northern capital). A human head with a moustache, with volutes above and typical 12<sup>th</sup>-century geometric patterns to either side. The human head at least has been re-cut in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps quite sympathetically, but to an extent that it can no longer be claimed as an authentic piece of Romanesque sculpture..
- (3) (The southern capital). A standing bird
- (4) A beast, perhaps an ox, damaged and patched in 19<sup>th</sup> century stone without any attempt to reproduce the carving.

The symbolism behind Romanesque sculpture is sometimes hard to understand, but in this case it seems clear that the carvings relate to the common emblems of the four evangelists,. Matthew (human), Mark (lion), Luke (ox) and John (eagle).

The shafts of the outer order have been renewed, but the adjacent jambs ls retain old tooling and plaster in places, showing that they too were re-set from the old church; one block midway down the north jamb has been seen as bearing faint traces of a carved human head<sup>3</sup>.

Returning to the exterior of the church, it looks as if Armfield may have retained the eastern angles of the old nave (in particular the south-eastern) but the chamfered plinth below is his. The south elevation of the chancel looks convincingly ancient, although documentary references suggest that some stone was replaced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the only obvious new stone is in part of the sill of the two-light window. There is no plinth. At the west end of the wall is a priest's door with a two-centred arch that has a continuous chamfer, under a hoodmould chamfered above and below, that has a roughly-carved lead as its eastern stop. Then come a pair of 13<sup>th</sup>-century lancets, with hoodmoulds again chamfered above and below; alongside them is a 14<sup>th</sup>-century window of two trefoiled lights under a semicircular arch, the spandrel being open.

The east end of the chancel has a plinth, and has a triplet of stepped lancets, set high in the wall so as to clear the reredos. A large patch of 19<sup>th</sup> century stone below these marks the position of the previous three-light window that was described as of 'Perpendicular' date, which itself had been heightened in 1875 when the chancel was repaired and remodelled (Ewan Christian being the architect), and given a new high-pitched roof. The gable is all Victorian.

---

<sup>3</sup> A close inspection with oblique lighting is not convincing; a 'head and eyes' might be no more than a configuration of natural features in the stone.

On the north of the chancel are three more lancet windows, which seem authentic 13th-century work other than their restored sills; it is recorded that in 1875 'half the north wall was taken down and rebuilt' (J & A Marchant 1998, 16).

Inside the chancel the walls are plastered, but the dressings around the openings are exposed. At the east end of the south wall is a piscine with quite a large trefoiled arch with a roll moulding, and a restored projecting moulded bowl; it is recorded that this was found in 1912 when the reredos was installed. The two-light window has a segmental rear arch, with a chamfer only to its head; the two lancets adjacent have blunt-pointed rear arches, and some masons' marks on their inner splays. All three windows have level 19<sup>th</sup>-century sills. The priest's door has a segmental rear arch, without any chamfer. The three lancets on the north have broad internal splays and 19<sup>th</sup>-century sills.

There is a small vestry of 1883 projecting from the east end of the north wall of the nave; the various medieval cross slabs re-set in its external walls have already been described, but there are also several chevron-moulded voussoirs, very like those of the south door and chancel arch, re-set in its walls. These may come from the former north door, described by Ord in 1846 as 'destroyed from its capitals downwards'<sup>4</sup> (ibid, 13) .

## References

Kirklevington. Township and Parish 1789 to 1918. The Kirklevington Research Group (Stockton on Tees Museums Service), n.d.

Kirklevington Revisited (same format as above, but no date or publisher)

Marchant, J & A (1998) St Martin's, Kirklevington. Christian Inheritance Trust.

Page, W (ed) (1923) Victoria County History of North Yorkshire II, 262-3

---

<sup>4</sup> Ord also saw 'tracings' of a former north porch. The remains of this door must have been destroyed in the 1861 rebuilding of the north wall of the nave, and kept in the church until re-set in their present position in 1883.