

The Church of Our Lady Seaton Delaval



Archaeological Recording

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The Church of Our Lady, Seaton Delaval

The Delaval Family Vault

It has long been known that a vault containing 18th century burials of the Delaval family lies beneath the sanctuary of the Church of Our Lady, which lies in the grounds of Seaton Delaval Hall. This was opened, and a brief record of its contents made, in 1893, and apparently briefly inspected by workmen when a new altar was installed in 1968. It was reopened again in December 2010 as part of a scheme of investigation relating to structural movements.

Reopening the Vault

The Church of Our Lady¹ is a three-cell structure, consisting of an aisleless nave, perhaps of c1100, and a later 12th-century eastern arm divided internally into chancel and sanctuary. It was known that the vault lay beneath the sanctuary; local memory placed its access in the centre of the chancel.

An area of modern floor covering in the centre of the chancel was removed, to expose a floor consisting of a range of rectangular north-south slabs set between two east-west beams c 0.95 m apart. Six slabs, each 0.38 m wide, were exposed; the beams, each 80 mm wide (and, as later revealed, 135 mm deep), each contained three pairs of mortices for (removed) uprights, perhaps the front of former choir stalls. The slabs were mortared round.



Removal of the fourth slab (from the west) reveals the head of the stair down to the vault

¹ The church was the subject of an Archaeological Assessment in June 2006, commissioned by the Diocese of Newcastle and carried out by P F Ryder

On Thursday 2nd December contractors lifted the slabs, starting at the west end of the exposed area; the mortar was first chiselled out, and then the slabs lifted by crowbar; the fact that the long sides of some were stepped, so as to interlock together, proved a further complication, but they were lifted without significant damage. Beneath the first two slabs two east-west rows of bricks, set end-on to the timbers, were uncovered. At first it was thought that these represented the sides of an infilled heating duct, but further investigation showed that there was only a single course of brick on each side, and that they had been laid in a shallow trench cut into a hard brown soil. The majority of the bricks seemed no older than the later 19th century – a typical specimen measured 220 by 120 by 75 mm – but some on the north were only 55 mm thick, and looked like older material re-used. At the east end of each row of bricks was a decayed piece of timber and then beyond that, and exposed by the lifting of a third slab, a large block of stone, which turned out to be the top step of a steep staircase descending eastward into the vault. Two more slabs were lifted to permit adequate headroom for entry; two further ones remained in position in front of the doorway at the foot of the stair, which is in line with the step up into the sanctuary.

The Stair

The steep staircase consisted of seven regular steps, each c 250 mm deep, set between walls 0.75 m apart, which are built of coursed squared stone, quite heavily mortared. At its foot a plain square-headed doorway 1.42 m high and 0.75 m wide, opened into the vault; towards the vault this is rebated all round. The lintel, 0.16 m thick, is set 0.25 m below the soffit of the slabs covering the stair (which form the chancel floor) but only 0.05 m below the soffit of the roof of the vault. The opening has been closed by a door; its hinges remain, set within the southern rebate, but the woodwork has fallen away completely, its decaying remains now scattered in the vault floor. On the west wall of the vault just inside the north jamb is a loop for a bolt, which must have been slid by means of a hand-hole in the door. On the north wall of the passage is a loop with a short length of chain and a mid-20th century padlock, which must have been used to secure the door after the vault was last entered in the 1960s.



The Stair looking west (Richard Carlton)

The Vault

The vault is rectangular in plan, 4.2 m east-west by 3.6 m north-south, and occupies almost the full area of the Sanctuary; its east end is more or less in line with the Sanctuary east wall, although the side walls are set c .25 m inside the lines of those above. It is covered by a shallow segmental vault, springing from the side walls at half its central height of 2.1 m. The walls and vault are of neatly-squared sandstone – with a distinctive narrow course at the springing of the vault – except for the east wall, which is cut directly in bedrock, except for the top c 0.35 m which is heavily cemented over². There is a thin layer of debris on the floor, which seems likely to be largely of bedrock³. There are a few markings on the vault, probably in a thick pencil – above the centre of coffin 5 is what looks like ‘XVII’ (with a double ‘X’) and above coffin 1 a single ‘X’; elsewhere there are one or two single strokes.



The vault, looking east, showing all six coffins (1 far right to 6 left)

The Coffins

There are now six coffins in the vault, in varying stages of decay, nos 1-4 on the south of a central walkway and nos 5 and 6 on the north. Five of the coffins are set on coffin rests (simply roughly-shaped upright blocks; some have chamfered edges and look like re-used material) and rest 0.55 – 0.85 m above the floor. Two further sets of three coffin rests, adjacent to the east end of the south wall and to the west end of the north wall, indicate further coffin positions, whilst a further seven similar blocks now lean against the north wall in between the latter trio of uprights.

The identification of the coffins is taken from an account compiled after the vault was inspected in 1893; a facsimile copy of a handwritten text (with sketch plan) appears in the church guidebook⁴.

² The only visible evidence which may relate to the 1960s works.

³ Although it is possible that decayed coffins and human remains have been buried here, perhaps in 1893; a similar re-internment took place in the floor of the vault at Dilston (see Discussion)

⁴ The Church of Our Lady, Seaton, Northumberland, Rev G.W.Jackson 1900 (revised 1997/2006)

- (1) Lead coffin adjacent to the west end of the south wall; a shaped coffin with its top shouldered to a narrow 'neck' and rounded head, in which is an embossed death's head with a crown. Beneath are a series of raised pillow-like bands bearing applied letters – the larger ones (here in bold) are ornate with floral decoration;

GD
OBIET
22 JUNE
1723
ETATIS
 55

At the foot are a pair of crossed bones, and there is a raised roll moulding to the top edge of the coffin.

This is the coffin of Admiral Sir George Delaval, who began to build the present Hall in 1718, but died when his foot caught in his stirrup and he fell from his horse (an obelisk was erected to mark the spot, close to the nearby Avenue; only its base now remains). The church guide, confusingly, cites the age of the admiral as 63 years (p.12).

- (2) Lead coffin, alongside (1), of traditional six-sided form, which has been encased in wood; only the top survives, coated in ?leathercloth with an embossed patterned edging. On the top are the remains of a raised metal box-like structure, set diagonally; two adjacent sides remain, that to the ENE having the pierced letters/figures:

IXV
 AI

whilst the adjacent SSE face has five pierced circular holes. Two embossed brass decorative plates lie loose on the coffin lid. There is no longer any identification, but the 1893 account identifies this as the coffin of Louisa Delaval (date of death not recorded)

- (3) Plain lead coffin of traditional six-sided form, now resting on the floor in between a set of three coffin rests set against the east end of the south wall, and coffin (4). Identified from a memorial plate, removed from the coffin in 1893, which now hangs on the north wall of the chancel and is inscribed ' Francis Blake Delaval, Esq. obit. Dec.9th,1752, aged 59 years'.
- (4) A similar six-sided coffin, raised on three coffin rests; as with (2) it has been encased in wood, but only its top survives – the lead sides show an interesting lightly-incised diaper/ criss-cross pattern; it is not clear whether this is intended to be decorative, or relates to some sort of binding or means of affixing the wooden casing. The top is covered by leathercloth, and has a border of brass studs, mostly still bright, with inward-pointing triangles at the corners and along the sides. Lying loose on the top are three embossed brass plates, and two sides of a metal box-like structure, exactly like those remaining in situ on coffin

(2) - and quite likely its missing two sides, as well as one corner of a coffin-top of leathercloth with identical brass studding which must have come from (3) or (5).

Identified as 'Sir Francis Blake Delaval. Knight of the Bath. Seaton Delaval, County of Northumberland. Born March 14th 1727. Died August 7th 1772. Obit 44'; burial plate now hanging on the south wall of the chancel.



(above) Diaper pattern on the side of coffin (4)



(left) Top plate of coffin (4) showing leathercloth (?) covering on boarding, with decorative border of brass studs; In the centre is a loose fragment of material with a similar patterned border, from another of the coffins, and two sides of a box-like structure, probably from coffin (2)

(photos Richard Carlton)

- (5) A coffin (recorded in 1893 as ‘Elizabeth Hick died Febry 25 1796 Aged 23 years’) which has disintegrated, leaving only its base (external lead and two shaped planks of the inner) resting on its three blocks; the remains of the remainder are heaped on the floor to the north, with the skull lying loose. Elizabeth was a mistress of Lord John Delaval (d.1808) who is buried in Westminster Abbey); he would have been 68 at the time of her death.
- (6) Lead coffin set against the east end of the north wall, on three blocks. In form and decoration – crowned death’s head at the top and crossed bones at the base - it is virtually identical to (1), except a little more square-shouldered. The inscription reads

AR
ETATIS
34
OBIT
JAN ye 3
1722

This is the coffin of Sir Alexander Ruthven; the Ruthvens had been related to the Delavals by marriage.

The church guide (p.12) refers to ‘many coffins.. gone to decay, only leaving traces in human remains’. The in-situ blocks indicate the positions of lost coffins against the east end of the south and west end of the north walls, and the stacked-up blocks perhaps an additional two or three, making an original total of ten or eleven. There is insufficient debris to account for these having decayed in situ, so perhaps some clearance has taken place, in 1893 or before. Three (?) loose skulls and a few long bones lie at the south-east corner of the vault⁵.

Discussion

The vault was opened on Friday 3rd December, and sealed up again on Monday 7th December. This was a rare opportunity to examine an 18th-century burial vault; recording was limited by the need to leave the contents absolutely undisturbed, thus confining access to the central ‘walkway’. Accessible features were measured and sketched using a measuring rod; digital photography was used to record over a hundred images, which were used in making drawings etc.

Two other similar vaults are known to have been examined recently in the North East.

The Russell Vault, beneath the Lady Chapel of St Brandon’s Church, Brancepeth, was constructed c1818 and is thus a century later than that at Seaton Delaval, although the coffins of Mary Hamilton Bunbury (d1832) and William Russell (d1850) showed a leathercloth covering decorated with rows of bronze studs very like that of Sir Francis

⁵ There is a memory that during the 1960s work workmen brought up ‘a row of skulls’ and stood them along the altar rails.

Blake's coffin here⁶; the embossed decorative plates were also very similar to those lying loose on this and on Francis Blake's coffin.

The vault beneath the Chapel at Dilston Castle, near Corbridge, Northumberland, has recently been examined by Northern Pennines Archaeology and a full report is available⁷. A series of coffins had been removed in the late 19th century, but a trial excavation in the vault floor revealed a lead 'anthropoid' coffin very similar in form to nos 1 and 6 at Seaton Delaval, bearing an embossed skull at the top, a heart, and below that four 'embossed'⁸ bars (but without any inscription) with crossed bones at the base. Dr Julian W S Liten of the British Museum identified it as typical of the second half of the 17th century – which would suggest that the Seaton Delaval examples of 1722 and 1723 represent a certain stylistic conservatism.



*Lead Coffin at Dilston
(photo Frank Giocco, Northern
Pennines Archaeology)*

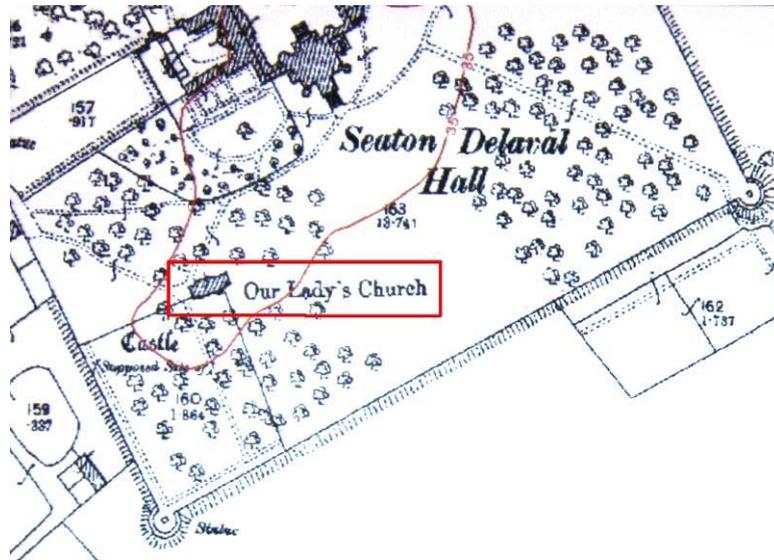
⁶ 2005 Report St Brandon's Church, Brancepeth After the Fire: Archaeological Recording 1998-2002 (P F Ryder) lodged with Durham County Archaeology Service

⁷ Dilston Castle project ref TP/36, available as a PDF file.

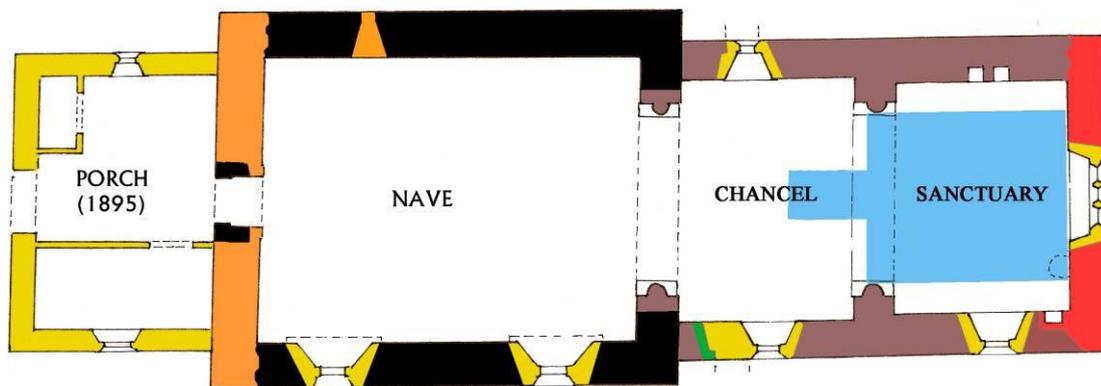
<http://www.northpenninesarchaeology.co.uk/downloads/dilston.pdf>

⁸ Those at Seaton Delaval appeared to have been applied rather than embossed.

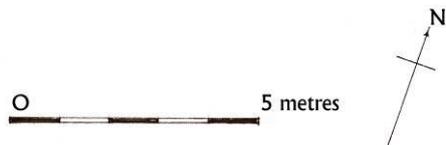
Location map showing the Church in the grounds of Seaton Delaval Hall



Phased Plan (from 2006 Archaeological Assessment, amended)



- KEY**
- c1 100
 - mid-12th century
 - mid-14th century
 - 16th century?
 - 17th century?
 - various 19th century dates
 - approx area of Delaval vault

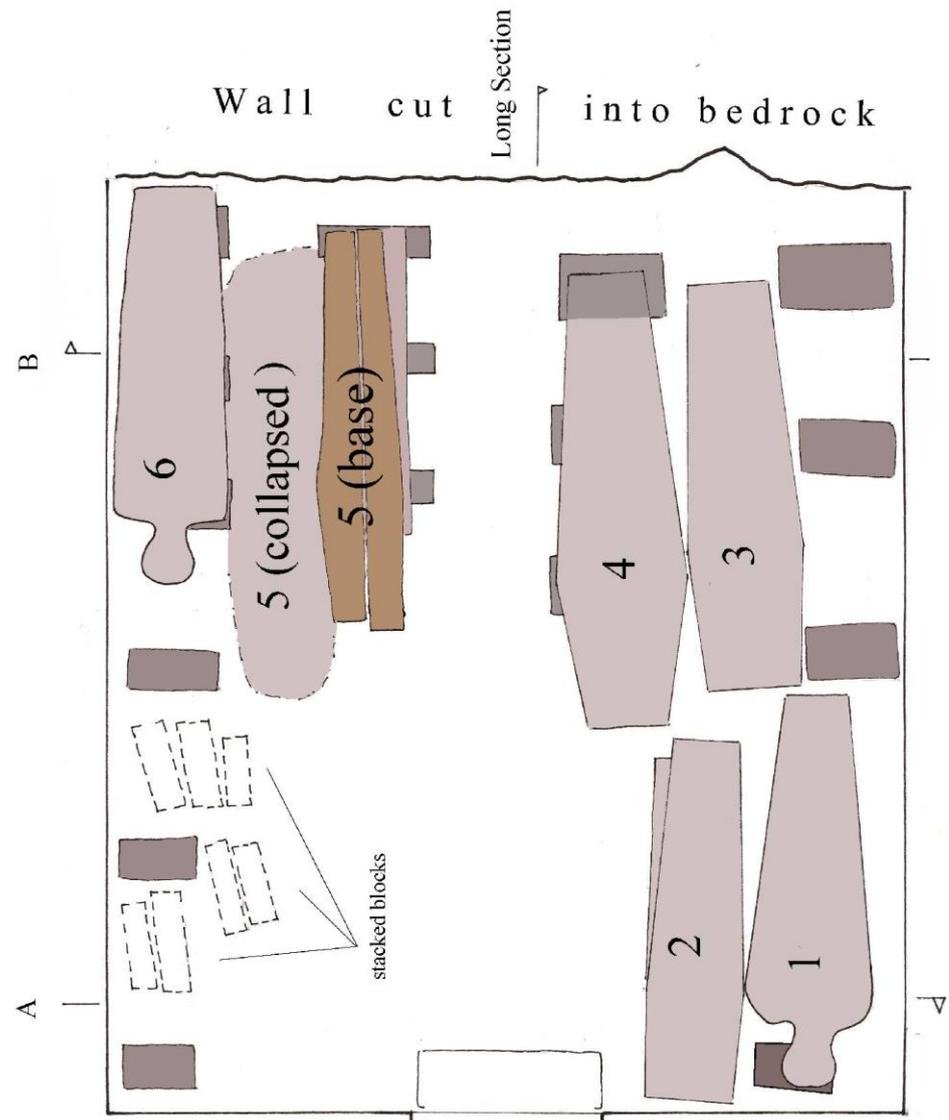
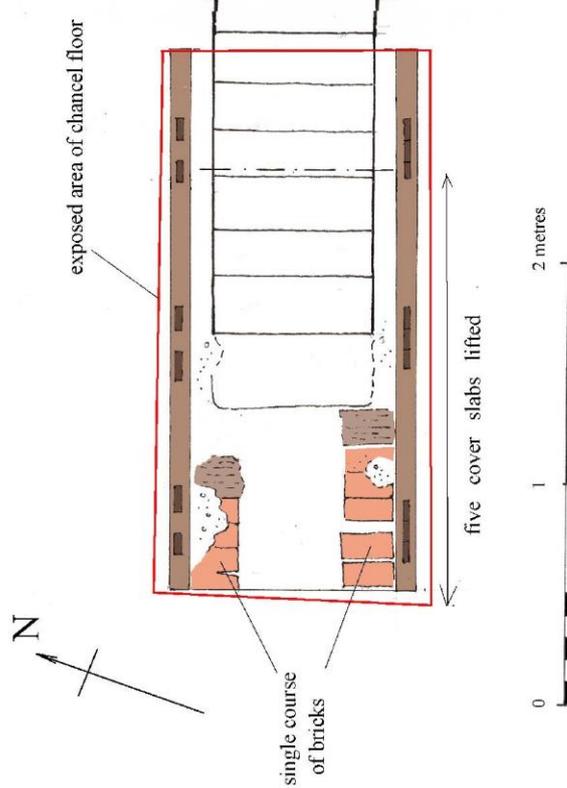


**THE CHURCH OF OUR LADY
SEATON DELAVAL**

The Church of Our Lady, Seaton Delaval

The Delaval Vault: Plan

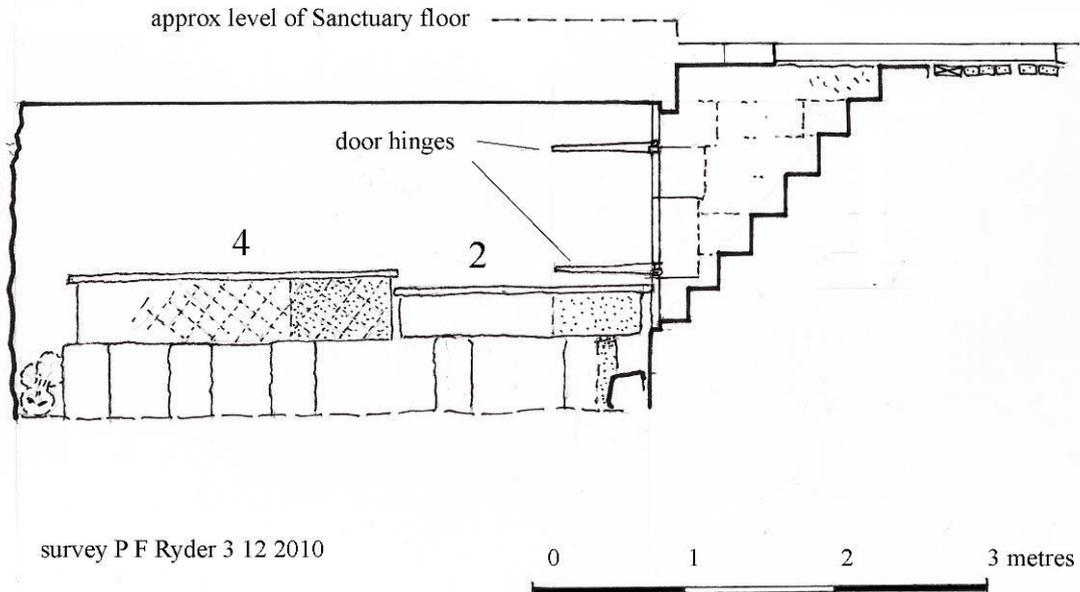
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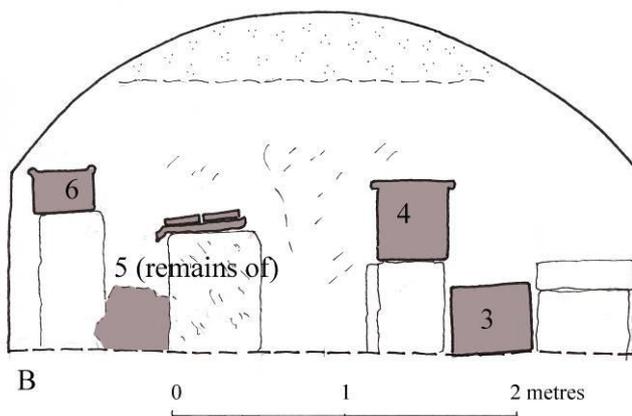
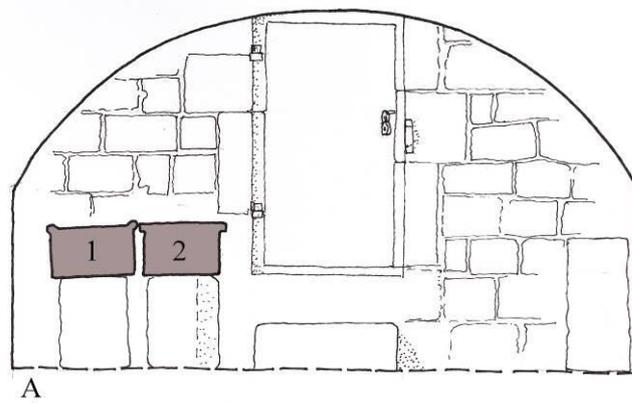
The Coffins

1. Admiral George Delaval 1723
2. Louisa Delaval
3. Francis Blake Delaval 1752
4. Sir Francis Blake Delaval 1772.
5. Elizabeth Hick 1796
6. Sir Alexander Ruthven 1722

The Church of Our Lady, Seaton Delaval
 Section through Delaval Vault looking South

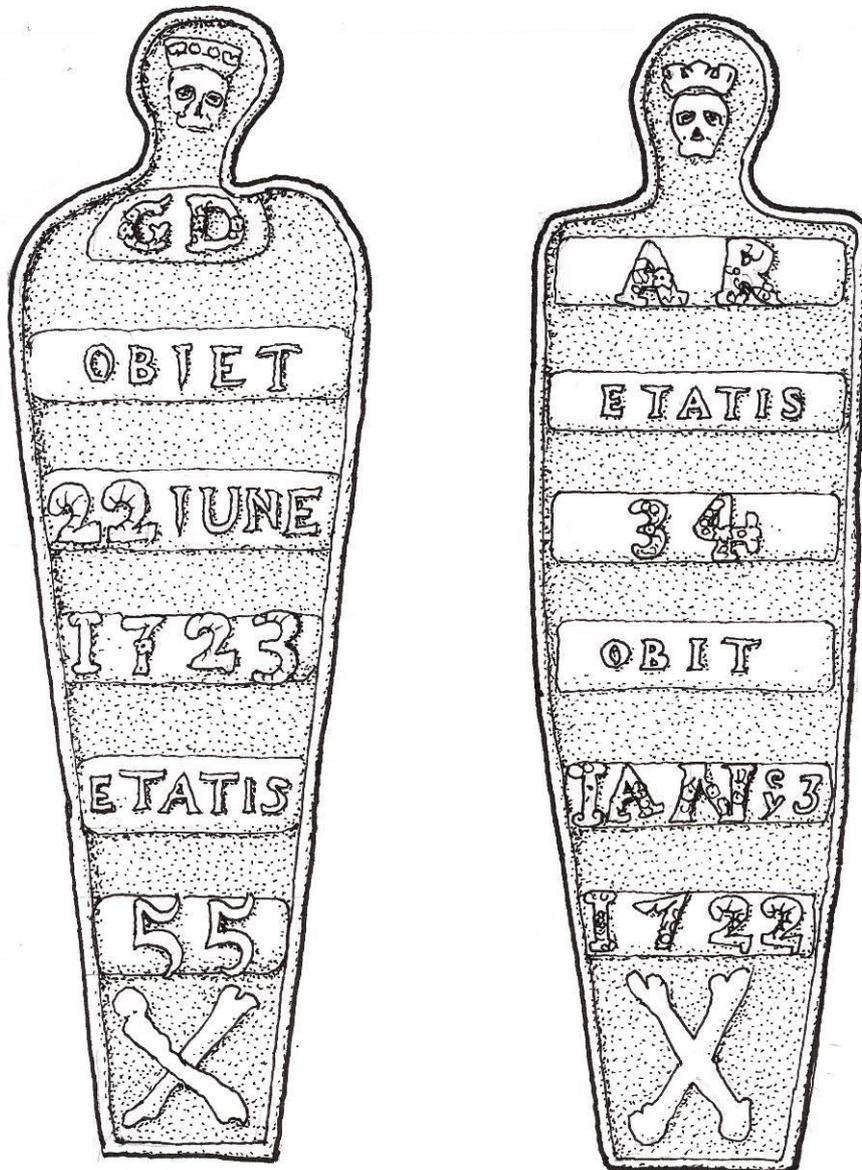


The Church of Our Lady, Seaton Delaval
 The Delaval Vault: Cross Sections



The Church of Our Lady, Seaton Delaval: The Delaval Vault.

Lead Coffins of Sir George Delaval and Sir Alexander Ruthven



0 50cm

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