

# All Saints' Church, Ryal

Northumberland



*South view*

An Archaeological Assessment March 2020

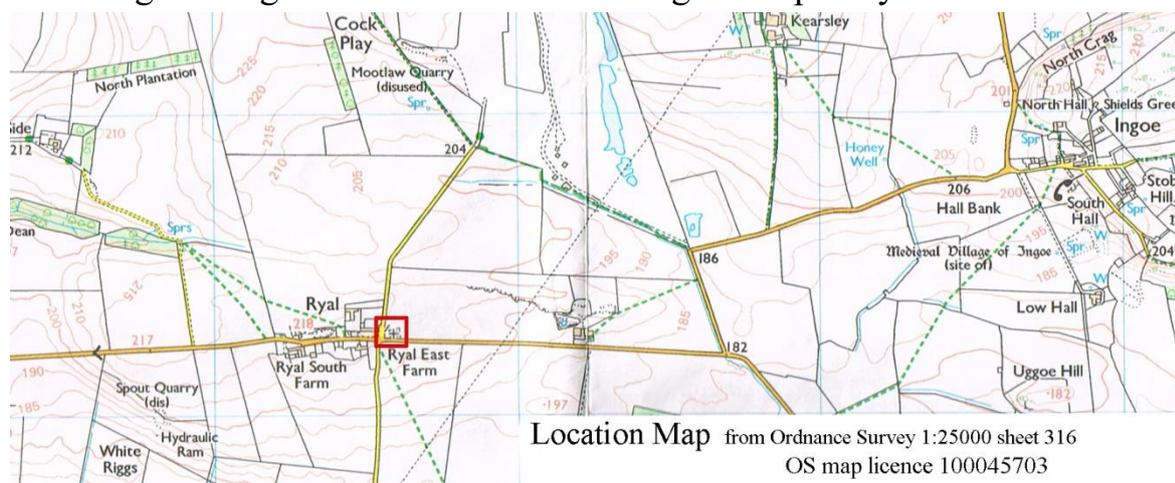
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## All Saints' Church, Ryal

Ryal lies amongst a network of minor roads in the rolling hill country north of Hadrian's Wall, c 10 km a little east of north from Corbridge. The parish church (NGR NZ 0159 7428) lies on the north side of the street at the east end of the hamlet. It is a little-known building, having slipped beneath the radar of most antiquarians, Morris' 'Little Guide' and the 1st edition of Pevsner's 'Buildings of England' volume both omitting it completely.



### Description.

The church has a simple two-cell plan of nave and chancel, Romanesque and 14<sup>th</sup>-century in style respectively. The nave, 9.4 by 5.8 m internally, has walls 1.2 m thick, the chancel, of the same width and 8.3 m long, has side walls 0.60-0.70 m thick and an east wall of 1.1 m.

The nave is built of coursed squared stone, with tooled ashlar dressings; the roofs of the whole church are of Welsh slate. There are clasping pilaster buttresses at the corners, a chamfered plinth and a string, chamfered above and below, at two-thirds height and a corbel table with alternately rounded and chamfered corbels. The pilasters have chamfered set-backs a little above the string. Set west of centre in the south wall is an impressive Romanesque portal, set in a shallow projection; it has a semicircular arch of four square orders, an impost band that is chamfered on its lower angle, and a hoodmould with a chamfered step. The inner order is continuous, but the outer three are carried on jamb shafts with simple cushion capitals and moulded bases. The string course steps out round the doorway projection, above which it has a sloped cap.

The doorway looks entirely of 19<sup>th</sup> century ashlar, but the Rev Perry who acted as architect to the 1879 reconstruction of the nave assures us that it follows the original as far as can be determined, and that some of the shaft bases are in fact in situ (a fact disguised by more recent decay making medieval and Victorian pieces indistinguishable).

A little to the east of the doorway is a full-height pilaster buttress. There are four vertical pairs of windows, all round-headed and with a narrow chamfer to their surrounds, with the upper ones, above the string, being shorter. There is one pair west of the doorway, one in the narrow bay to the east, and two in the broader end bay. The eastern and western of the lower windows have their monolithic heads cut into pieces of medieval cross slabs<sup>1</sup>.

Virtually all these features are of 1879 (prior to which part of the wall had actually collapsed), but it appears that some older masonry does survive, a couple of courses in the bay west of the doorway, parts of the chamfered plinth and rather more in the broad eastern bay, and the south-eastern angle pilaster.

The north side of the nave has similar features; it is divided into three bays by full-height pilasters, with an additional pilaster close to the west end, and the only windows are three round-arched lights (like the upper tier on the south) above the string course; on this side the pilasters have their chamfered set-backs below the string. For some reason the chamfered plinth (which seems to have been more or less completely renewed on this side) is not continued round the westernmost pilaster, and the next pilaster to the east has stop-chamfered angles to its lower section.

Much more ancient fabric survives in this wall, up to and including the string course in the central and eastern bays (and in the north-east pilaster). In the broader of the western bays the stonework is a little more regular, and may represent the infilling of a former north door (although there is no real sign of this internally).

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<sup>1</sup> These seem to have been re-used in 1879, rather than before, as the window arches seem freshly cut. It seems to have

The west end (right) is complicated, and interesting. There are two massive buttresses, fashioned from the stubs of the side walls of a 12<sup>th</sup>-century tower. The best evidence of this is at the north-west corner; the angle pilaster here is all of 1879, and is rounded by the (renewed) string, but immediately to its south, on the short length of wall before the northern buttress, is an old weathered section of string, which then returns for a couple of stones westward along the north face of the buttress. The northern is the larger of the two buttresses (1.8 m long and 1.2 m



wide) and at its outer end seems to rest on the footings of a section of wall which steps out on both faces. Might this widening be to accommodate a newel stair in the north-west corner of the former tower? The southern buttress is only 1.2 m long but rests on a broader footing which on the south has a chamfered plinth, a little above the level of that of the nave.

The walling between the buttresses is of coursed squared stone, in quite large blocks; only the bases of the jambs of the former tower arch, 2.1 m wide, are visible suggesting that most of the fabric is post-12<sup>th</sup> century reconstruction.

The gable coping, chamfered on its underside, rises to the broad Romanesque bellcote (all of 1879); where the coping meets the bellcote there is a carved bracket in the form of a grotesque animal head<sup>2</sup>. The bellcote has a string course, with above it a round-arched opening, flanked by carved roundels, and then a second string carried over the arch as a hood-mould; the cap is pyramidal, with a small ring-cross finial.

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<sup>2</sup> The southern could, with some imagination, be taken for a fox; there is a local tradition that the Tynedale Hunt (who apparently made a generous contribution to the 1879 restoration), when passing the church, doff their caps to 'Mr Fox' on the church.

The Chancel is much simpler. It is constructed of coursed and squared lightly-tooled stone, with ashlar dressings. There is disturbed fabric around the various openings, which are 1879 replacements of 1776 originals, from the surrounds of which probably come some blocks with close parallel tooling. The uppermost courses of the side walls, upper eastern quoins and top of the east gable are all in more sharply-cut stonework, presumably of 1879. The south wall has a two-centred arched priest's doorway, and a single lancet window to each side, and the east end has a three-light window; the tall central light has a cinquefoiled head, and the lower side lights are trefoiled with cusped spheric triangles (a favoured mid-Victorian motif) above. All the openings have simple moulded hoods with swept circular stops; the east window has an outer order of roughly squared voussoirs. The east gable has simple hollow-chamfered kneelers and a coping chamfered on its underside, and rises to a cross fleury finial. The north wall is totally featureless, without a trace of any opening; the only point of interest is the presence of some reddened blocks, which might be those which the Rev Kerry referred to that 'glow with the ruddy evidence' of burning by Scots raiders.

### **The Interior**

The internal walls of the nave are of bare stone those of the chancel plastered. The most striking feature is the west wall, across which no less than nineteen medieval cross slabs have been re-set. The only structural feature visible on this face of the wall is what appears to be a blocked doorway, high up on the south – a straight joint (the north jamb?) is visible, although an opening here would be very much on the line of the south wall of the former tower.

The side walls of the nave show no pre-1879 features except for the lower fabric in the north wall (where there is no real sign of the possible blocked doorway). The east end of the nave contains the chancel arch, which is the best surviving early feature of the building. The arch itself is pointed, and of two chamfered orders (to the nave only), springing from an impost band, chamfered below, that crosses the whole west face of the wall, and also forms a distinct set-back, the wall thinning from c 0.,80 to c 0.,55 m above. The outer order of the arch is continued as a square step down the jamb, but the inner rests of a semicircular-section respond with a scalloped capital, the northern having sunk-star ornament and the lower intersecting arches, both typical Romanesque motifs. There is an



*The chancel arch*

eroded projecting block, perhaps a corbel of some sort, adjacent to the outer order a little above the springing of the arch on the north.

The chancel is plastered internally, and has no features of interest; there is a step up in line with the west face of the chancel arch, and two more, beyond the priests door, into the sanctuary.

The roofs of the church are all of 1879. That of the nave is of four bays, with trusses of quite heavy scantling that have king-posts and raking struts both from the tie to the principals, and from midway up the post; there are two levels of

purlins and a ridge board. The chancel roof is quite different, of wagon form with common rafter pairs with ashlaring to the eaves and intersecting X-form struts and collars.



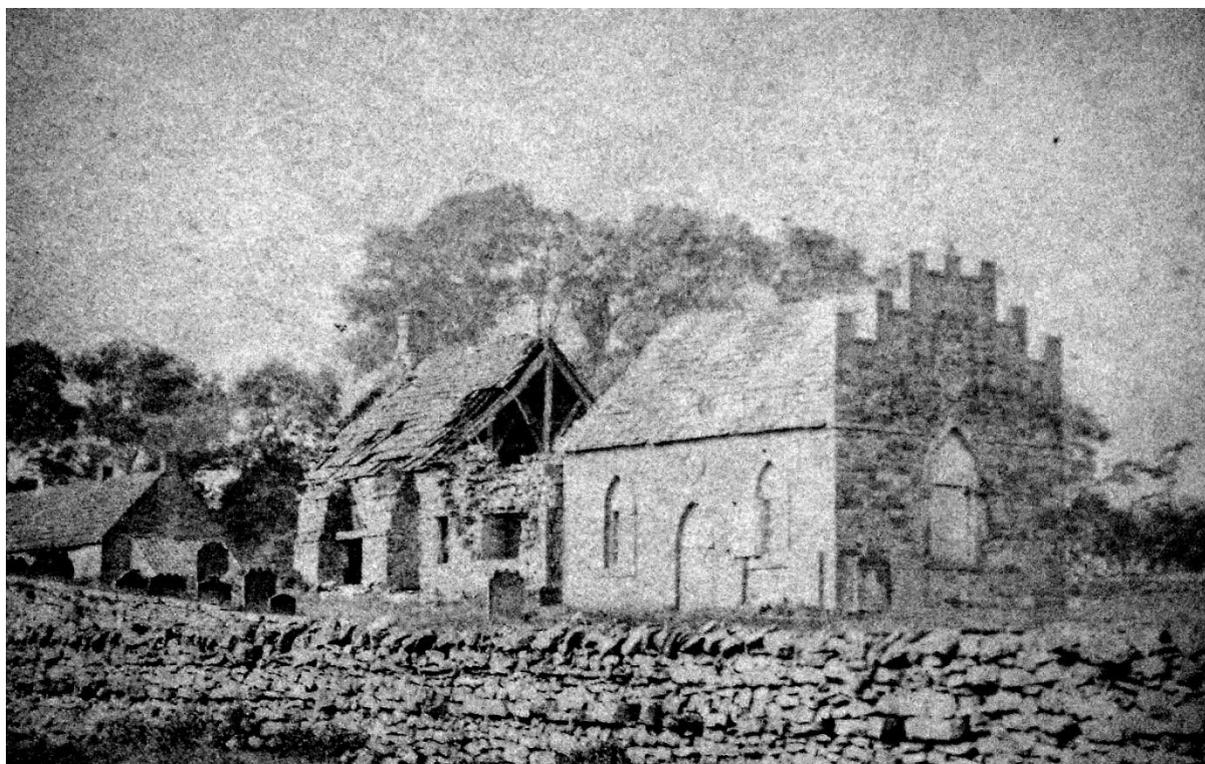
*The chancel arch capitals, north (above, south (below)*



## The Structural Development of the Church

The following discussion relies almost entirely on two contemporary sources relating to the 1879 works, both written by the Rev Charles Kerry (and both reproduced in full in Appendix 1). The first is a letter soliciting funds for the restoration, and the second an account written when it was finished, and published in the 'Hexham Herald'. Both survive as handwritten copies in a scrapbook kept at Halton Castle (which also has photographs of the church before and after the works); the scrapbook is the property of the Blackett family; it was photographed, with permission, by the writer in 2004 and since transcribed.

The nave of the church was dated to c1150 by the Rev Kerry, and there is no need to argue with this. The principal surviving feature is the chancel arch, or rather its jambs – the arch itself, to judge from its pointed form, is probably a 13<sup>th</sup> century reconstruction. The decoration of the capitals is certainly of mid-12th century character. The Rev Kerry is clear that the nave plinths, string course, the spacing of its pilaster buttresses and the footprint of the south door



*The church before the 1879 restoration*

are all based on firm evidence as are the forms of the window heads, and the angle of their internal splay. The contemporary chancel has gone, but its foundations were seen during the 1879s works, and their (presumably internal) dimensions recorded as being about 24 by 14 ft.

However, the Romanesque church did not remain in this form until the 19<sup>th</sup> century restoration, prior to which it was in very poor condition. We are told it had 'numerous' heavy buttresses, and the one surviving pre-restoration photograph shows a pair of huge ones flanking the south door. These were clearly of later medieval or early post-medieval date, and would seem of excessive dimensions for a small Romanesque nave. However, bearing in mind the later medieval history of other churches in the area, Ryal might well have been made defensible at some time. At Bellingham, Corsenside and Elsdon this entailed the creation of stone vaults, and this would certainly have exercised an outward thrust on the walls, which could well have necessitated the construction of these buttresses. At Corsenside the section of the now-removed vault is visible on the internal face of the west wall, and with the eye of faith it is just possible to discern something of the same sort here.....although not enough to be certain. The vault had certainly gone by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the photograph shows a collapsing king-post roof over the abandoned nave.

The creation of the vault might also have entailed the thickening of the walls, as happened externally on the nave walls at Corsenside and internally on the aisle walls at Elsdon. There is a hint that this happened to the north wall at Ryal, where there is little sign internally of the former north door hinted at in the external fabric; however, the wall is much the same thickness as on the south, where the doorway, which the Rev Kerry assures us was fully attested in the surviving fabric, could only be accommodated by a wall of the present thickness.

So one might tentatively envisage a small but sophisticated mid-12<sup>th</sup> century edifice, of nave, chancel and west tower, being wrecked in some Scottish raid (perhaps in 1297 as Rev Kerry suggested although the defensible measures at the other churches already mentioned seem more likely to be of the 16<sup>th</sup> or even early 17<sup>th</sup> century) and reconstructed (perhaps just the nave, as may have been the case at Corsenside) as a defensible building. Then, as at Corsenside, the vault was removed (or collapsed) at some post-medieval date, but the patched-up nave remained in use before falling into total disrepair.

We know that the chancel was rebuilt in 1766; the old photograph shows it as a typically Gothick building, with a stepped east end forming something of an ‘eyecatcher’. Whether this was a total or partial rebuilt is not quite clear, as the present east wall is considerably thicker than the side walls so could retain some medieval fabric. In 1879 the chancel was remodelled by the Architect Ewan Christian – in a manner which bore absolutely no relation to the Romanesque nave, for which the Rev Kerry did the drawings. Its rather attractive wagon roof is probably its best feature, which again contrasts with the heavy king-post trusses over the nave.



*The re-set cross slabs (numbered), and possible vault line marked in red*

## The Medieval Grave Slabs

Probably the most memorable feature of the church is the collection of medieval cross slabs now set in the internal face of the west wall of the nave, one of the best groups of such memorials in the county, and worthy of some proper interpretative material. They have been described and illustrated<sup>3</sup>, with the exception of (21) which is in Appendix 2, along with the earlier drawings.

## Other Lapidary Material

Built into the west wall of the nave, at its south end above the cross slabs, are two carved voussoirs (right), thought to be from the 12th century south door. A third simpler voussoir, with chevron, is set in a corresponding position at the north end of the wall.



## Archaeological Assessment

Any works involving disturbance of the floor or fabric of medieval church, or church on a medieval site, will require archaeological vigilance, in the forming of a watching brief, or in large scale works perhaps a trial excavation. Here at Ryal the fabric of the nave is exposed, and can be fairly clearly 'read; to distinguish the surviving 12<sup>th</sup>-century work and what was by the standards of the time scholarly reconstruction in 1879. The above-ground walls of the

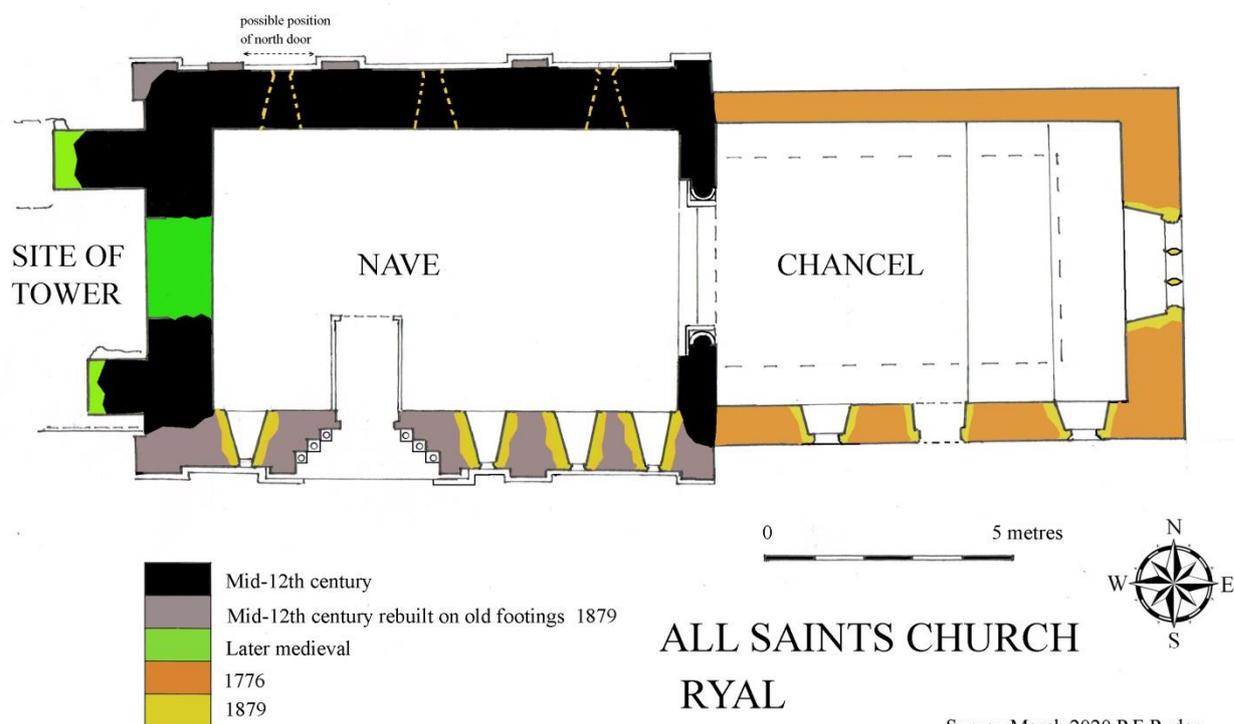
<sup>3</sup> 'Ryder, P.F (2000) 'Medieval Cross Slab Grave Covers in Northumberland. 1 South-West Northumberland'. *Archaeologia Aeliana* 5<sup>th</sup> ser. XXVIII, 73-75, 104-105)

chancel are slightly more vulnerable; plaster may conceal wall paintings or texts of the 1766 building, or just possible older fabric incorporated.

As regards underfloor works, Rev Kerry specifically states that the foundations of the 12<sup>th</sup> century still survive beneath the chancel, and these will need proper recording if ever disturbed.

The area immediately outside the west end of the church is perhaps of special concern, where unconsolidated footings of the 12<sup>th</sup> century tower disappear under grass. As there do not appear to be any burials in this area, with a little excavation these could be laid bare, recorded, and properly conserved, which would provide a useful small-scale archaeological project for some appropriate community group, as well as enabling the church to present a more coherent visible record of its past.

**Peter F Ryder March 2020**



## Appendix 1.

### Rev Kerry's Material (from a scrapbook at Halton Castle)

*Ryal is two miles from Matfen. It was the Lordship of John Lord Beaumont who died in the reign of Richard II: having with it many other estates in the County, & others, to his son & heir Henry Lord Beaumont, then 16 years of age who was Knighted at the Coronation of Henry IV. The Chapel, belonging to the Vicarage of Matfen, had been allowed to fall into a most ruinous condition, when in the year 1878 the Revd. Charles Kerry, then Vicar of Matfen, by the help of the neighbourhood, undertook to restore it. The following is his "Cry for Help".-*

*"A Village Church in ruins is a silent but heavy reproach in a Christian land. The church at Ryal, in the parish of Matfen, is in this unfortunate condition. The nave roof has fallen in, the floor is torn up, the windows utterly destroyed, and a part of the south wall has fallen down. The chancel is little better: but in this portion of the sacred edifice I have restored Divine Service after a cessation of 35 years; and the service is well attended. As Incumbent of the Parish my duty is very obvious. This church must be restored. The fabric is of great interest. From architectural evidence it appears to have been built (the nave at least) about the year 1150. It was burned by the Scots in that terrible incursion in the months of Octr and Novr 1297 when flaming homesteads and blazing churches marked their devastating course down Redesdale, & through this neighbourhood. The stones within the church still glow with their ruddy evidence. About six years afterwards the poor survivors gathered round the hallowed spot, and repaired this ruined sanctuary.*

*In their poverty they rook up the memorials of the dead and with their help constructed the numerous heavy buttresses round the little edifice. One of these time-honoured supports has recently fallen, revealing several most interesting gravestones of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. I propose to insert these relics, for their better preservation, in the walls within the building. The restoration will cost little less than £600.*

*We want a good Bell, of from 10 to 16 cwts, for the population is very scattered. It shall bear the donor's name and will be a useful memorial of his piety, for many generations.*

*A Chalice, Paten & Almsdish will also be required.*

*The Churchyard Wall is in a state of great dilapidation, and this too we must substantially repair/ £40 would do this effectively....*

Charles Kerry

Vicar of Matfen with Ryal

*The Church was re-opened 1<sup>st</sup> Nov 1879*

*The following article is from the Hexham Herald, 8<sup>th</sup> Nov 1879*

*Description of the Restoration of Ryal Church*

*The Chancel has been restored by the Ecclesiastical Colonial Missions, from designs by Ewan Christian, their architect. The former chancel was erected in 1776, in the place of the original Norman one, the foundations of which still remain beneath the present structure. The dimensions were about 24 by 14 feet.*

*The foundations of its east wall lie just within the lowest step of the present sacramine (?). The nondescript chancel of 1776 has been converted by Mr Christian into a very seemly ecclesiastical building. The old door and windows have been supplanted by accurate Gothic forms. The old roof, with its white, vaulted ceiling has given place to a "waggon" roof of pitch pine of great beauty and solidity. The Altar Rail is of oak, with twisted brass standards: the flooring of Ingoe stone. It will be remembered that the old nave was an utter ruin: the roof had collapsed, the side walls in part fallen down, and the church arch built up with brick-work.*

*The nave has been restored on its ancient lines, from designs prepared by the vicar, whose chief object has been to reproduce the Norman fabric almost destroyed by the Scots in 1296, of which but little remained above ground. Happily, however, sufficient evidence remained to determine its general if not exact character. The bases of the grand Norman doorway were found in situ: fragments of its shafts were found in the walls. The string course of 1150 is almost intact on the north side.*

*Half a window-head and an original splay gave sufficient data for the present window, and a few old groins confirmed the angle of the splay adopted. The plinth, and bases of the pilasters were found perfect round the whole edifice.*

*These have been most carefully replaced, and so far has the strictly conservative spirit been strictly carried out that the very stones of the chancel arch were all numbered when taken down and each one replaced in its ancient position.*

*As the funds at the Vicar's disposal (altogether about £520) would not allow him to rebuild the Norman tower, traces of which may be seen at the west end, he has replaced the turret of 1776 by another of Norman character of excellent proportions. This now contains one of the finest and sweetest toned bells in the County: the gift of two brothers, in memory of their father. The nave roof of pitch pine weighs more than 7 tons. The walls follow the original dimensions, and vary in thickness from 4½ to 3½ feet. The nave is lighted by 11 small windows, 7 of which form a kind of clerestory above the string course: 3 of them are on the north side, all deeply splayed. The best feature of the building is the doorway, a faithful restoration (in its dimensions at least) of the doorway of 1150 which has 5 bays formed by receding and concentric arches supported by columns resting on bases, facsimiles of the old:*

*indeed, where possible, the originals have been placed in situ. The buttresses at the west end have been carefully restored. All the ancient monuments discovered during the restoration (one of them as early as 1180) have been carefully placed in the west wall within. Most have the Cross, with sword or spears<sup>4</sup> by its side. One has a scythe shaped knife>with these stones are two voussoirs of the grand doorway showing its original magnificence. There are also a few other relics of the first church: the memorials 17 in number.*

*The whole of the stone required has been generously granted by His Grace the Duke of Northumberland from his quarry at Ingoe, in the parish. The farmers, churchmen, have kindly contributed the carting of material, about 300 loads, in addition to the old material having been used.*

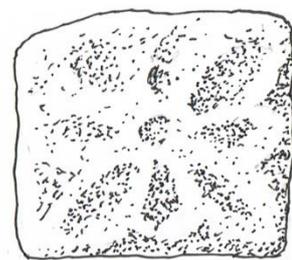
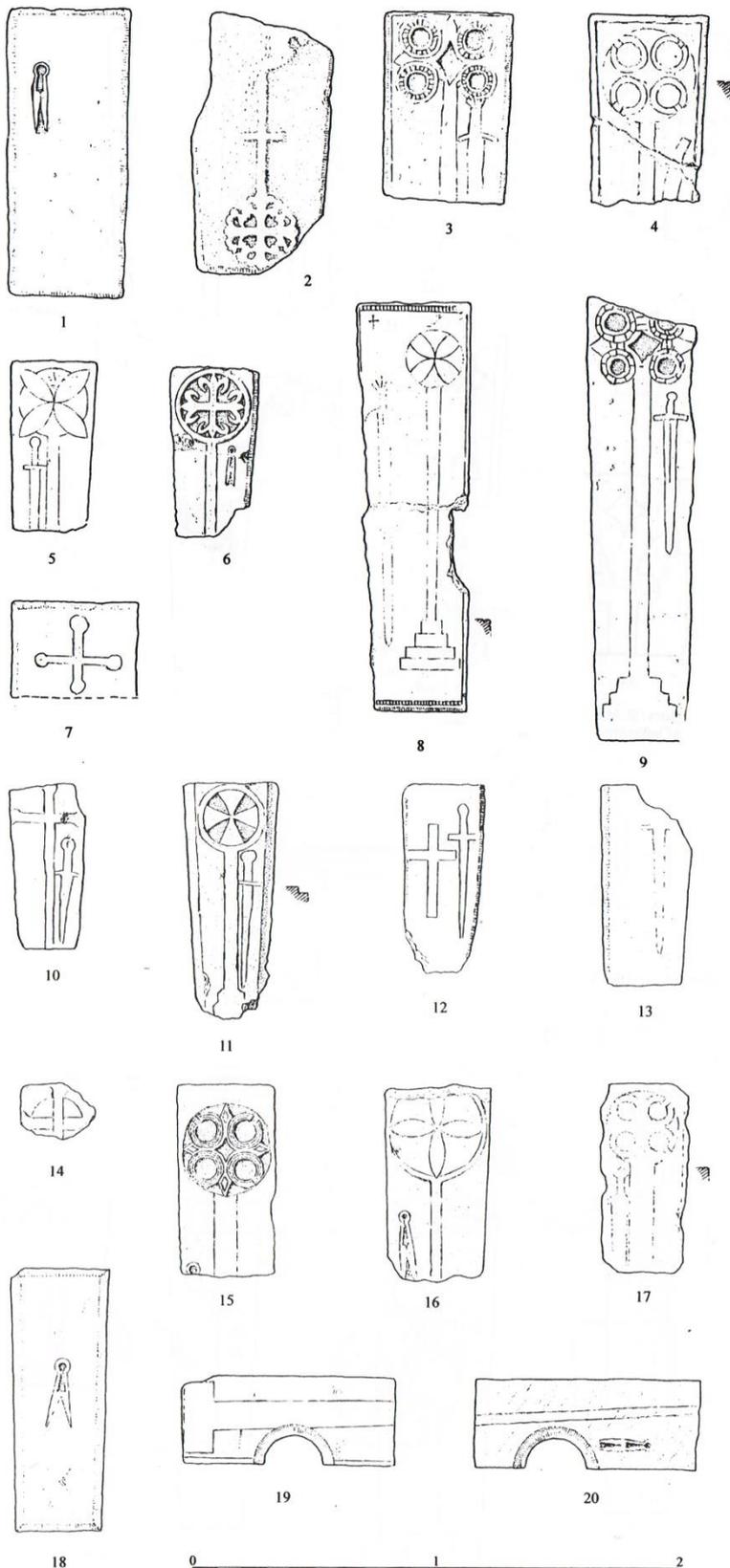
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<sup>4</sup> Clearly a mistake for 'shears'.

# RYAL CROSS SLABS

PFR drawings  
c1985

Appendix 2. Cross Slabs  
(after Ryder 2000)



0 10 20 cm

Ryal (21)

0 1 2  
Metres  
Scale at 1:20