

## **Victoria County History of Cumbria Project. Draft Architectural History Report**

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Parish/Township: SKELSMERGH

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### **St John the Baptist, Skelsmergh, Kendal: an architectural appraisal<sup>1</sup>**

The church of St John the Baptist was designed in the Early English style in 1870 by the Kendal architect, Joseph Bintley, and was consecrated on 2 November 1871.<sup>2</sup>

On plan, the original church comprised an aisle less nave (14.22 x 7.13m); a raised east chancel (5.33 x 4.23m); a north transept (4.35 x 4.56m) at the east end of the nave; a north vestry (3.35 x 2.44m) off the chancel with an attached porch (1.22 x 1.83m) and, a west door with a shallow porch.<sup>3</sup> The height from the floor to the underside of the exposed roof ridge in the nave is 8.53m and in the chancel is 8.75m. Externally the ridge of the nave is approximately 400mm higher than the chancel ridge which is due to the exposed rafters in the nave roof being cranked 5.94m above floor level to permit a false ceiling to be inserted. The main rafters carry on in a straight line above the roof space to form a void of approximately 620mm above the nave ceiling creating the illusion internally that the chancel is taller than the nave. A sketch showing the construction of the upper roof is contained in Appendix 1 at the end of this paper (Fig. 1 & 2).

In 1884 an organ chamber was constructed off the south wall of the chancel with three shouldered lancet windows inserted in the new south wall (Fig.13).<sup>4</sup> The two original windows in the south wall of the chancel were displaced by the formation of an open arched entrance between the chancel and the organ chamber and were set aside for reuse when the chancel was extended.

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Tony Cousins for his invaluable assistance and, his generosity in providing a copy of his paper, 'Skelsmergh' and also extracts from his working papers.

<sup>2</sup> *Westmorland Gazette*, 4 Nov. 1871.

<sup>3</sup> Floor plan signed by Joseph Bintley, architect, Kendal, 1870 (information supplied by Tony Cousins and believed to have formed part of the planning application).

<sup>4</sup> Research notes on Skelsmergh Church chronology supplied by Tony Cousins.

In 1888 the original chancel was extended eastwards by 3.66m to its present day dimensions and the stained glass east window incorporated into the new east wall.<sup>5</sup> The two original lancet windows in the south wall of the chancel were reused in the new south wall of the extended chancel. The original doorway from the north chancel wall leading to the vestry was infilled and a new doorway formed 1.83m further west in the same wall.<sup>6</sup> A new two-light lancet window with a pierced quatrefoil circle over the two lancets was inserted in east end of the north wall of the extended chancel (Fig. 15) and a new single lancet window was inserted in the new south wall of the extended chancel.

In 1974 the original west door of the nave was removed and the upper part of the doorway converted to a large trefoil window (Fig. 6).<sup>7</sup> The present entrance to the church was formed in the south west wall of the nave displacing a single lancet window. It is not clear what happened to the lancet window.

Internally, the walls are plastered and painted. The floor is level throughout the nave and north transept and is covered with York stone. The raised chancel floor is paved with Minton encaustic tiles. The roof to the nave and transept below the ridge voids is open with the exposed rafters stained and the sloping ceiling between the rafters plastered and painted. The underside of the chancel roof is exposed and has moulded principal rafters and purlins which have been stained and decorated. Over-boarding has been laid over the roof framing which has also been stained. The east window was re-glazed in 1884 with stained glass by Heaton, Butler and Bayne.<sup>8</sup> The stained glass in the nave is a twentieth century replacement but there is a notable two light lancet in the south nave by Joan Howson in 1937 depicting Mary in supplication to Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

There are three paintings of apostles on the north wall of the chancel by Powell Brothers of Leeds executed in c.1889. The figures are (from the west) St James, St Peter and St John.<sup>10</sup> The backdrop to all three paintings is identical, possibly depicting sedilia used by clergy officiating at the Mass. The images have been painted in oil colour on a background material which has been adhered to the wall plaster.

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<sup>5</sup> Skelsmergh Church chronology.

<sup>6</sup> Skelsmergh Church chronology.

<sup>7</sup> T. Cousins, 'Skelsmergh', available at <http://www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk>, dated 11.03.2013, p.32.

<sup>8</sup> Information supplied by Tony Cousins.

<sup>9</sup> The stained glass in the left-hand window has the caption 'Rabboni' beneath it which means 'My Great Master' in Hebrew. From a terrier of 1894, it is believed that the Powell Brothers also painted the decoration on the Chancel ceiling [information provided by Tony Cousins]

<sup>10</sup> St Peter and St John can be positively identified from their stylistic presentation of St Peter holding the keys and St John holding the chalice with a serpent or dragon. Tony Cousins has identified the third painting as possibly being St James the Great and this is supported by a painting in The Victoria & Albert Museum showing St John holding the Pilgrim's staff with either a scallop or water bowl.

Externally, the walling is of random coursed Bannisdale slate;<sup>11</sup> the door and window surrounds and plate tracery are constructed of sandstone; the roof is covered with Westmorland slate. There is a double bellcote containing one bell at the west end of the nave above a tower rising 17.07m above ground level terminating in a gabled roof.

There are twelve different window types and two different door types (excluding the new south door to the nave) which are described in detail in Appendix 2 (Fig. 3-16) at the end of this paper.

### **Gothic Revival in the Victorian period**

The term ‘Gothic Revival’ refers to England’s medieval past from the architecture of the first Gothic building, Edward the Confessor’s Westminster Abbey of 1065, to the second phase of the ‘Perpendicular’ style between 1500 and 1525. We refer to architectural styles as a convenient way of recognising a pattern of familiar design features that allow us to place a church as belonging to a particular period and to fix a date, or at least a date range, on it. That is not the case with Gothic Revival: in the first case it is not a style, but a representation or approximation of medieval styles and a Renaissance view of history, reflecting changing attitudes to politics and religion over time.<sup>12</sup> For that reason it is more appropriate to refer to Gothic Revival rather than to Gothic Architecture.

Victorian Gothic Revival had its roots in the first half of the nineteenth century and from the 1840s influenced the different styles of ecclesiastical architecture to the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> There were three categories of pointed Gothic referred to during the Victorian Revival of the original medieval style as well as overlapping transitional periods, recognising that the timing of architectural development varied across England (Table 1).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> T. Cousins, ‘Skelsmergh’, available at <http://www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk>, dated 11.03.2013, p.4.

<sup>12</sup> A. Buchanan, ‘Interpretations of Medieval Architecture, c.1550-1750’, in M. Hall, *Gothic Architecture and its Meanings* 1550-1830, (Reading, 2002), 27.

<sup>13</sup> J. Price, *Sharpe, Paley and Austin: A Lancaster Architectural Practice 1836-1942*, (University of Lancaster, 1998), 39.

<sup>14</sup> Based on J.H. Parker, *An Introduction to the Study of Gothic Architecture*, (Oxford, 1861), 14-15.

*Table 1: Categories of Gothic Architecture*

Architectural Style	Approximate Date <sup>1</sup>	Alternative References
Transitional period: Romanesque <sup>2</sup> to Early English	1075-1199	<sup>2</sup> Norman
Early English	1200-1299	First Pointed
Transitional Period: Early English to Decorated	1275-1299	
Decorated	1300-1399	Second or Middle Pointed. Also, French Early Second Pointed
Transitional Period: Decorated to Perpendicular	1375-1399	
Perpendicular: First stage Second stage	1400-1499 1500-1525	Third Pointed
<sup>1</sup> The Approximate Dates vary between authors, but those stated above are a reasonable representation		

Victorian church building was a direct consequence of a period of unprecedented social, cultural and legislative change.<sup>15</sup> During the 1820s and 1830s there was a gradual revival in Catholicism, although it was not until the 1850s that the church was sufficiently established to justify building Catholic churches, predominantly in rural communities.<sup>16</sup> The Catholic Church received an upsurge in interest following publication of two books by Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin: ‘Contrasts’ [in Architecture] in 1836 followed by ‘The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture’ in 1841. Pugin blamed the Protestants for the destruction of Gothic architecture which he said had been designed by Catholics for followers of the Catholic faith.<sup>17</sup> The growth in the interest of Catholicism prompted a surge in architectural reform in the Anglican Church at a time when the Oxford Movement, (also known as the Tractarian Movement), was formed in 1833.<sup>18</sup> The Movement was an organisation of High Church Anglicans that sought a renewal of Catholic or Roman Catholic thought and practice within the Church of England in opposition to the Protestant tendencies of the church and argued for the reinstatement of lost Christian traditions of faith and their inclusion into Anglican liturgy and theology.

Another influential group of Anglicans was the ecclesiological reform movement, the Cambridge Camden Society, formed in 1839. They published the *Ecclesiologist* in 1841 and brought the doctrine of the Oxford Movement and Pugin together adapting them to their own uses and aimed to instruct architects how to design in this style which was seen as the highest form of

<sup>15</sup> C. Brooks & A. Saint, *The Victorian Church: Architecture and Society*, (Manchester, 1995), 1.

<sup>16</sup> D. Avery, *Victorian & Edwardian Architecture*, (London, 2003), 44.

<sup>17</sup> Avery, *Victorian & Edwardian Architecture*, 45.

<sup>18</sup> Brooks & Saint, *The Victorian Church*, 7.

art.<sup>19</sup> It is this combination which shaped English church architecture from the 1840s to the end of the century. They believed that Anglican churches should adopt Catholic liturgical principles with a change of emphasis from sermons to the Eucharist which had ceased to be understood in a Catholic sense. Ecclesiological influence on Anglican church building lasted throughout the Victorian period.

This meant that chancels should have a distinct identity and be separate from the nave resulting in the focus of the interior being redirected from the pulpit to the altar. To maintain continuity with the medieval Catholic period, new churches should be designed in the historically correct Gothic style. Early English was seen by Pugin to be imperfect because it was experimental and not fully developed, a viewpoint endorsed by George Gilbert Scott; Perpendicular moreover was held to be decadent and connected to a decline in religious commitment.<sup>20</sup> The Second Pointed or Decorated style was regarded as fully developed, highly sophisticated and was associated by Pugin to the period in England when Roman Catholic observance was at its peak.<sup>21</sup>

New churches were built, or existing churches altered and adapted, with porches and a vestry added and the chancel extended to incorporate a sanctuary and a choir; the altar was moved to the extreme east end of the chancel. The chancel was raised above the level of the nave and the pulpit relocated to the east side of the nave and the pews arranged to provide a central aisle. In Gothic architecture, elevations were dependent upon, and secondary to, the plan form.<sup>22</sup>

The initial church buildings built between 1820 and 1845 were based on the First and Third pointed styles.<sup>23</sup> Between 1845 and 1870 the Second pointed style was adopted and a return to the First Pointed style (Early English) embracing naves that were wide and high, a narrower chancel which was even higher than the nave and, short lancet windows in plate tracery.<sup>24</sup>

The Early English style with its plainness and lack of decoration was seen to be more appropriate for the 1860s and 1870s depicting a strong, austere and robust character.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Brooks & Saint, *The Victorian Church*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> J.S. Curl, *Victorian Churches*, (London, 1995), 34.

<sup>21</sup> Curl, *Victorian Churches*, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Sharpe, Paley and Austin: *A Lancaster Architectural Practice*, 46.

<sup>23</sup> Curl, *Victorian Churches*, 33.

<sup>24</sup> Avery, *Victorian & Edwardian Architecture*, 48.

<sup>25</sup> Avery, *Victorian & Edwardian Architecture*, 49.

### **The architectural interpretation of Skelsmergh church**

The elevations of St John the Baptist church at Skelsmergh reflect the first pointed Early English style and the plan form is precisely what the ecclesiologists were advocating for the design of Anglian churches to reflect a new vision for the revival of the Church of England in country parish churches built by rural landowners.<sup>26</sup>

The nave is wide and high; the chancel is narrow and high and was lengthened in 1888 to accommodate a large choir; the north transept and vestry were incorporated into the original design and an organ chamber added in 1884. The pulpit is exactly where the ecclesiologists advocated on the east wall of the nave to the south and a dedicated area for the font at the west end of the nave was part of the original design. The original west entrance door, the door to the vestry porch and all the windows are in the Early English style varying from the early thirteenth century windows in the bellcote, the spherical plate tracery window in the west elevation above the original west entrance door, the one and two light lancets in the nave, chancel and vestry and the shouldered windows of the vestry and porch, to the mid thirteenth century tall lancet windows in the west elevation. The only exception is the Early Geometric (late thirteenth/early fourteenth century) grouped lancet window in the east elevation.

It is not known if the architect, Joseph Bintley, was a member of the ecclesiologists, or where he obtained his interest in Gothic Revival from. Bintley's first church before Skelsmergh was All Saints at Underbarrow, west of Kendal, a new church erected in 1869.<sup>27</sup> The chancel was later remodelled (post 1876) and the tower porch rebuilt, but whether this was done by Bintley is unclear.

It was intended from the outset that Skelsmergh would be after the Gothic Revival style from the application made by Archdeacon Cooper to the Incorporated Church Building Society, which refers to 'the Early English Decorated style'.<sup>28</sup> This could denote the transitional period between Early English and the Decorated period of approximately 1275 – 1299. Whether the idea for a church in the Gothic Revival style originated from Archdeacon Cooper, Joseph Bintley or the Carlisle Diocesan Church Extension Society is unknown.

There was no shortage of churches in Westmorland and Cumberland that had already been designed in the Gothic Revival style which Bintley would have been aware of. The earliest was St

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<sup>26</sup> Brooks & Saint, *The Victorian Church*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Hyde & Pevsner, *Cumbria*, 653.

<sup>28</sup> Skelsmergh Church Chronology

Cuthbert Roman Catholic Church at Burnfoot, Wigton, by Ignatius Bonomi in 1836-37 with ‘Y’ tracery from the Decorated period.<sup>29</sup> The chancel was extended eastwards in 1857 incorporating five stepped lancets and westwards with a façade of shafted lancets. This was followed by Our Lady and St Wilfred Roman Catholic Church at Warwick Bridge by A.W.N. Pugin in 1840-41.<sup>30</sup> The church comprised a nave with a bellcote, a chancel and sacristy. There were groups of three lancet windows at the west and east ends with the central lancet set to rise above the outer lancets. In the side elevations, narrow lancets alternate with large two light Decorated ‘Y’ tracery windows.

The first Anglican church to follow the Gothic Revival was St Mary, Vicarage Road, Ambleside, designed by George Gilbert Scott in 1850-54 in Decorated style with geometric tracery. Others followed:<sup>31</sup> All Saints, Kirkgate, Cockermouth in 1852-54 by Joseph Clarke in the Decorated style with geometric tracery; St Mary and St Bega church at St Bees was designed by William Butterfield, a prominent ecclesiologist, between 1855-58 with the chancel designed in the Early English style; Holy Trinity Chapel, Stile, Great Langdale rebuilt in 1857-58 by J.A. Cory; St Bridget at Brigham by William Butterfield in 1863-76; St Peter at Great Asby in 1865-66 by W. & J. Hay which had encaustic tiling in the chancel; St Nicholas, Lowther Street, Whitehaven, designed by C.J. Ferguson; two churches by E.W. Pugin: the first, St Bega (Roman Catholic), Coach Road, Whitehaven in 1865-68 and the second, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (Roman Catholic) at Cleator Moor in 1869-72 and finally, St Michael at Lamplugh in 1870 by Butterfield.

That is not to say all the above churches have the same plan and elevational details as Skelsmergh, but they all belong to the Gothic Revival. Interestingly, the Holy Spirit Church in Distington by Hay and Henderson of Edinburgh (1884-86) was in the Early English style and incorporated three quatrefoils approximating to a spherical triangle similar to the one below the bellcote at Skelsmergh.<sup>32</sup> These are rarely seen in churches: the only other examples which are closer to the design at Skelsmergh are in the south transept of Westminster Abbey (1250) and at Exeter Cathedral.

Skelsmergh is an important church as an interesting example of the determination of the established church to re-establish its presence and build in the Gothic Revival style to reflect the

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<sup>29</sup> Hyde & Pevsner, *Cumbria*, 684.

<sup>30</sup> Hyde & Pevsner, *Cumbria*, 662.

<sup>31</sup> The following examples are taken from Hyde & Pevsner, *Cumbria*.

<sup>32</sup> Hyde & Pevsner, *Cumbria*, 335.

spiritual revival of the Anglican Church, adopting Pugin's architectural ideals, but adapting them to their own identity.

An updated floor plan is provided in Appendix 3 (Fig.17)

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Issue 2: Draft



## Appendix 1: Section through the Nave Roof



Figure 1: Cross section through the Nave showing the extended rafters above the exposed ceiling



Figure 2: Chancel and Nave roof showing the difference in ridge height

## Appendix 2: Detailed description of the external windows and doors



Figure 3: West Bellcote

The west facing bellcote window is an early thirteenth century style plate tracery unglazed two light bald lancet with a splayed head and reveals and a central column shaft with plain mouldings forming the capital and a simple plain moulding above an octagonal base and an unglazed circle in the apex. Triangular pierced openings between base of the stone circle and the heads of the two lancets. Hood mould over the window opening terminating at the springing point of the arch with short horizontal returns either side. The window is set in a dropped arch with splayed reveals above stepped stone jambs with splayed reveals.



Figure 4: East Bellcote

The east facing bellcote window is an early thirteenth century style plate tracery unglazed two light bald lancet with a plain central column shaft with no capital or base and an unglazed circle in the apex. Blocked triangular piercing between the base of the stone circle and the heads of the two lancets. No hood mould.



Figure 5: West Tower window

In the west wall of the tower below the bellcote is an early thirteenth century style spherical window comprising a stone pointed arch surmounting a stone circle pierced with four circular openings and five smaller pierced openings. The lower half of the stone circle is enclosed by an inverse truncated triangular stone surround. Hood mould which terminates on the horizontal centre line of the stone circle with short horizontal returns either side. Triangular piercing between the head of the head of the stone circle and the inner apex of the arch. The window has been glazed by a single sheet of glass internally.



The original west doorway has a mid-thirteenth century style large trefoiled head which has subsequently been glazed to the upper half of the doorway and infilled to the lower half. Hood mould terminates at the springing point of the arch with short horizontal returns either side.

Figure 6: Former West Doorway (now a window)



Two mid thirteenth century style plate tracery single light lancet windows either side of the former door with a simple trefoil at the head. The cusps are sub-ordinated with pointed index lobes (i.e. recessed as an inner order with the small spandrel between cusp and the arch pierced). A rudimentary form of bar tracery, although strictly neither plate nor bar tracery. Hood mould terminates at the springing point of the arch with short horizontal returns at either side. Curved head and splayed plastered jambs internally; flat cill internally. Stepped jamb stones and splayed cill externally.

Figure 7: West lancet window



Early thirteenth century style plate tracery two light bald lancet glazed window set in a flat headed truncated triangular headstone; stepped jamb stones externally and splayed external cill; no hood mould externally; flat cill internally; curved head and splayed plastered jambs internally.

Figure 8: Two light lancet window  
(Nave, North Transept, Chancel and Vestry)





Early thirteenth century style plate tracery single light bald lancet glazed window set in a flat headed truncated triangular headstone; stepped jamb stones externally and splayed external cill; no hood mould externally; flat cill internally; curved head and splayed plastered jambs internally.

Figure 9: Single light lancet widow: (Nave, North Transept, Chancel and Vestry)



Thirteenth century style plate tracery in the north transept wall comprising two light tall bald lancet glazed windows with a pierced stone circle in the apex; the spandrel between the heads of the lancets and the bottom of the circle is pierced; no hood mould externally; splayed external cills; wide mullion between the lancets dressed with stepped jamb stones and infilled with slate panels externally; stepped jamb stones internally and externally; flat internal cill; curved window heads and splayed and plastered jambs internally.

Figure 10: North Transept window (North wall)



Early thirteenth century style flat headed shouldered (or corbelled) two light glazed lancet window in the north porch wall set under a flat lintol (sometimes referred to as a Caernarvon arch or lintol) with stepped jamb stones externally; splayed cill externally; no hood mould externally. No internal access available.

Figure 11: Vestry Porch window (North wall)



The east vestry window is an identical design to the Vestry Porch window (North Wall: Figure 11) except it has a three light glazed lancet window.

Figure 12: Vestry window (East Wall)



Figure 13: Organ Chamber window (South Wall)

Early thirteenth century style flat headed shouldered (or corbelled) group of three glazed single light lancet windows in the south Organ Chamber wall set under a flat lintol with stepped jamb stones externally; splayed cill externally; no hood mould externally. No internal access available.

Note 1: The difference between the two and three light windows to the Vestry and Vestry Porch (Figures 11 & 12) and this window: here there are three single lancets compared to the two and three light windows which have mullions between the lancets and are designed as single window units.

Note 2: Although flat-headed windows do occur in the Early English style, they more usually take the form of two or three light trefoiled windows beneath horizontal hood moulds. The shouldered arch is most commonly used in domestic work and is unusual in windows.



Figure 14: Vestry Doorway (East wall)

Early thirteenth century style flat headed shouldered (or corbelled) doorway in the east wall of the north porch under a flat lintol. Large carved stones either side of the door head set at an angle of 45°; stepped jamb stones externally below the sloping door head stones. No internal access available.



Figure 15: North Chancel window

Thirteenth century style plate tracery in the north east chancel wall comprising a two light lancet glazed window with simple trefoils forming the heads of the lancets and a glazed pierced stone circle enclosing a quatrefoil in the apex; external hood mould terminating at the springing point of the arch with short horizontal returns on either side; splayed external cill; stepped jamb stones internally and externally; flat cill internally; curved window head and splayed plastered jambs internally.



Figure 16: East Chancel Window

Early geometric style (late thirteenth and early fourteenth century) three light glazed lancet window in the east chancel wall surmounted by an apex circle enclosing multi-foil openings. The two outer lancets have simple trefoils at the heads and are each surmounted by a trilobe with pierced spandrels. The central lancet is wider and taller than the outer lancets and has a simple bald pointed head. The spandrels either side of the head of the central lancet between the trilobes and the apex circle are pierced with triangular openings. The apex circle encloses glazed multifoil openings with pierced openings between the outer foils. External head mould terminating at the springing point of the arch with short horizontal returns on either side. Stepped jamb stones internally and externally; flat cill externally and splayed cill internally; curved stone window head set under a stone arch and with splayed stone jambs internally.

### Appendix 3: Updated floor plan of the Church

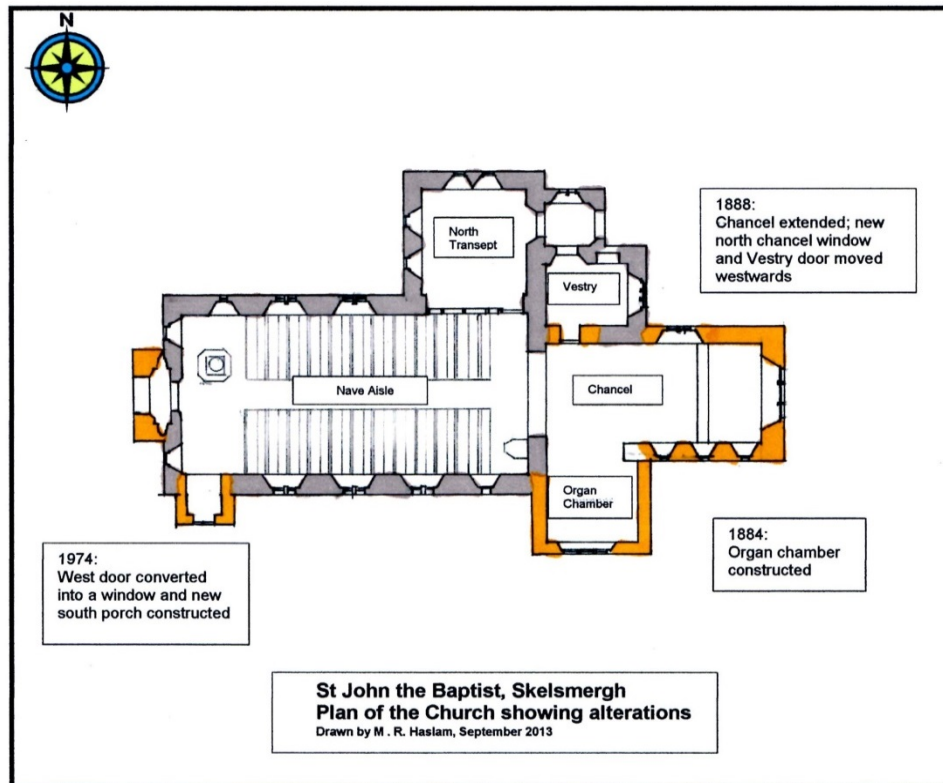


Figure 17: Plan of the Church showing alterations