

A photograph of the Holy Cross Church in Haltwhistle, showing the stone gable end with three crosses and a bell tower. The church is silhouetted against a sunset sky with soft pink and orange hues. The architecture features a prominent gable with three crosses: a large cross on the left, a smaller one in the center, and a circular cross on the right. To the right, a bell tower with two arched openings is visible, with a bell hanging in the lower arch. The foreground is partially obscured by dark, reddish-brown foliage.

A Visitor's Guide to
Holy Cross Church
HALTWHISTLE

Over 800 years of Christian Worship

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF CHRIS ANSON



Walking in the Steps of the Saints

Welcome to this 13th century Christian church in the town of Haltwhistle, Northumberland.

Folklore

There is sound documentary evidence to show that Christian worship has taken place in Haltwhistle for the past 800 years. There are indications that it may even have been twice as long - covering all three millennia.

It is probable that there was a Saxon church in Haltwhistle before the Norman Conquest, but it would have been very different from the present building. It might have been purely a cross set up as a meeting place. It could have been made of stone, like the cross at Bewcastle, which has been dated to the period 700-800AD. Alternatively, it might have been a simple wooden structure.

There was a great era of church-building following the victory of the Christian king, Oswald, over the combined pagan forces of Cadwalla and Penda of Mercia at the battle of Heavenfield just outside Hexham in 635. Oswald called in Aidan, a monk from Iona, to convert the heathen, and, according to tradition, a church was erected on the haugh (mound) by the riverside. In all probability it was dedicated to Saint Aidan, hence the strip of land to the



west of the church being known as 'Edens Lawn', as derived from the Celtic Llan Aidan. When it was part of the church glebe 'gravestones and bones were frequently dug up'.

Nowadays, the parish church is known as the 'Church of the Holy Cross'. It would seem to be Hodgson in his authoritative History of Northumberland who first linked the two names together. It is easy to see from where the St Aidan's is derived, but the Holy Cross is less obvious. Apparently it was customary to dedicate a church to the saint whose feast day followed directly after the church's fair. This does not explain why the church's double-barrelled title was dropped, nor why the Holy Cross supplanted the St Aidan's. Another reason for thinking that there was probably a pre-conquest church at Haltwhistle lies in the tradition relating to Paulinus. King Edwin of Northumberland married a Christian princess from Kent. When she moved north to join her husband she brought with her an Italian missionary bishop - Paulinus. Tradition has it that Paulinus made a great missionary effort in the immediate vicinity of Haltwhistle between 625 and 632, culminating in the baptism of Edwin at the King's Well, Walltown, only four miles away (it should be noted that there is also a rival tradition which alleges that King Arthur of the Round Table was baptised at King's Well).



Unlike Aidan, whose Celtic tradition was that of an itinerant preacher, Paulinus came from the Roman tradition, which laid emphasis on organisation and church building. Churches tended to be built where there was a supply of water for baptisms, and there was a well in the old vicarage kitchen. The water stoup, now

at the back of the church, may have come from a Roman temple on Hadrian's Wall.

The fact remains, however, that while there is much that supports the tradition of a pre-conquest church at Haltwhistle, there is no hard proof, and it must remain a matter of speculation.



Written Record

The earliest written reference to a church at Haltwhistle is in the charter issued in 1178 by William the Lion of Scotland, when he founded the Benedictine Abbey of Arbroath. To secure the Abbey's financial viability the King granted the



income from church lands in the Manor of Haltwhistle to the monks. This grant was confirmed in 1180 and by Robert Bruce in 1199. Further confirmation of the grant was made in 1211, 1214 and again in 1220 - shortly after which, work was begun on the present church, under the direction of the Abbots of Arbroath and their 'master builder'. The latter was

a man of ideas who had the courage of his convictions, and departed from the accepted way of doing things with pleasing results.

The Normans had been the rulers of England for over a hundred years by this point, and feudalism was well established. One bizarre result of this was that during parts of the 12th and 13th centuries the Kings of Scotland owed allegiance to the Kings of England for land in England. At one time they were the Lords Seigneur of the Franchise of Tyndale, of which Haltwhistle was a part.

In 1191 William the Lion gave the Manor of Haltwhistle to Robert de Ros, a

Norman feudal lord. In 1200 he was granted the right by King John to hold a weekly market on a Thursday.

The Lords of the Manor would have then had the right of advowson - the appointment of the Parish Priest. Quite frequently a semi-literate clerk was appointed at a meagre wage to hold the services. Meanwhile the Priest, who might be the younger son of the lord of the manor, could be living far away from the parish enjoying the revenue dues. These could be quite considerable and included land endowments (glebe land), tithes on parishioners' income or produce, fees for weddings and funerals, a mortuary death duty and the collection taken in church on feast days.

In 1240 William de Ros challenged the Charter which gave the church income to the monks at Arbroath. There was a clear conflict of economic interests between



the de Ros estate and the monks. He was unsuccessful, but in 1307 Edward I granted him a charter to hold two fairs annually. The Scottish Crown lost the Franchise of Tyndale in the late 13th century and with it the patronage of the church at Haltwhistle. In 1306 the monks at Lanercost petitioned unsuccessfully to be given the right.

In the end it was the bishops of Durham who acquired the patronage of Haltwhistle, and it was the Bishop of Durham, who, after much grumbling, had to pay the ransom to secure the release of the vicar Robert de Pykwell, who had been captured and carried off by the Scots in 1311 when they attacked Haltwhistle, burning the town and severely damaging the church.

In 1329 the Crown took the patronage back into its own hands, but later Richard II

gave it to the convent at Tynemouth, where it remained until the dissolution of the Convent in 1553. It was then given to John Wright and Thomas Holmes. The original parish was very large, stretching from Greenhead in the west to Ridley in the east – about eight miles. In 1827 a church was built at Greenhead, and a separate parish was established in 1892. Two years earlier, Beltingham had also been made into an independent parish – a church having been built at Henshaw just before.

The earliest entry in the parish registers is a burial: George Ridley of Henshaw who was buried in 1656. The earliest recorded baptism was in 1691, and the earliest marriage in 1703. The Minutes of Vestry Meetings are contained in three volumes dating from 1717.

Modifications & Developments over the Years

When the church was first built it would have been a bare shell with rushes on the floor, and possibly benches along the walls for the elderly and infirm, hence the saying ‘weakest to the wall’.



It is a fine example of early 13th century architecture. Its importance lies in its being of one style built in one period. It is remarkable for not having a tower, and because the nave and aisles make the main body of the church into a square. The chancel is also disproportionately long in comparison with the nave.

In his book *The Church at Hautwysel* Tony Storey emphasises the relationship between the needs of the community and the development of the church. Initially the building was a community



refuge with narrow lancet-type windows with the bottom high enough to make access difficult. In Jacobean times, with the union of the two kingdoms, the church was no longer seen in this light. High box pews of oak were installed for the gentry as status symbols. A pulpit with sounding board was added, and in the 18th century sash windows were injected into the aisles, and also the roof pitch was lowered. In 1768 a new bell cast by Lester and Pack of London was installed.



In 1870, during the 44 year incumbency of Canon Joseph Lowe, Robert Johnson, an architect from Newcastle, was appointed to carry out a major restoration. The lancet windows were restored and the roof pitch raised to its original height.



The oak pews were replaced by pitch pine, and the stone parapet to the nave was removed. The west wall was rebuilt and the roof replaced. The bell-cote was heightened. The north entrance, hitherto the main way into the church, was transformed into a porch-like vestry and the priest's door in the South wall was blocked up. At the same time the heating was modernised. Two boards which used to hang above the chancel arch, which probably bore the Ten Commandments, disappeared, as did the murals.



The clergy had relied upon the visual image to put over the gospel at a time when the congregation could neither speak Latin nor read English. During Canon Lowe's incumbency a Church school was founded, followed in 1874 by a Board school. Perhaps the 'powers that be' thought that the murals were no longer needed now that the congregation was semi literate. Whatever the reason, their absence is a great loss. You can gain an idea of what the church looked like before 1870 from the photograph just to the left of the vestry door.

Originally only the very rich or important folk were buried in a coffin. Most people were buried in a shroud, and corpses were laid one upon another. Many



of them were buried under the floor of the church so that the floor level inside of the Church was considerably higher than the ground level outside. The levels were restored. In addition a number of stone grave covers were brought in from the churchyard.



Towards the end of the 19th century the rich and influential abandoned grave stones in favour of stained glass memorial windows. The east window of 1872 was a composition by William Morris & Co based on designs by Burne Jones, Madox Brown and Philip Webb. The other windows are the work of Burne Jones and Charles Kempe of London between 1885 and 1903.

The 20th century saw almost as many changes as the eighteenth. In 1923 the rood screen, which was designed by Messrs Hicks and Charlewood of Newcastle and carved by Ralph Hedley, also of Newcastle, was dedicated to the memory of Canon Lowe, a large tablet recording his achievements was placed on the north wall in the sanctuary.



It was in 1926 that the Hope Wallace family of Featherstone Castle donated a fine Persian rug for the Sanctuary. With the rug spread over the tiles and grave covers many an unsuspecting clergyman has tripped, though there is no record of any of them having fallen! The carpet was removed in the 1998 restoration to reveal the tile mosaic floor. The Hope Wallace family also donated a small circular oil painting of Madonna and Child which was a gift at that time and hangs in the north aisle.

During the 1960s Harris Walker, a churchwarden, executed the AUMBRY (7), the Communion Rail, candle sticks and cross for the Lady Chapel, the gates for the High Altar Communion Rail and the second board for the list of vicars. For a long time music for services was provided by strings. The 1870 restoration led to the introduction of a hand-blown pipe organ. Recently a nonagenarian visited the church and recalled how he had been paid sixpence a week to pump the organ. In 1920 the keyboard was where the organ is now, but the pipes were at the east end of the north aisle where the Remembrance Book is displayed. In 1990 Mrs Dowson who had been a loyal member of the congregation died and left a will bequeathing the money for a new electronic organ.

This was replaced by a three manual, 41 drawstop Makin Westmorland organ which was dedicated by the Dean of Monmouth, the Very Reverend Dr. Richard Fenwick on the 30th July 2005. The installation was made possible by the generosity of Ms Ethel Moore a devoted member of the congregation.

In 1996 the PCC applied to English Heritage for a grant to repair the roof as water was coming in where the chancel roof joined the main roof. This was the third attempt in twenty years to sort out the roof and during restoration work in the chancel, it was discovered that the roof was



covered by a magnificent decoration of sage-green foliage interspersed with crosiers and mitres in black and white, possibly the work of Charles Kempe.

Personalities

There are few well-known individuals or eccentric personalities connected with the church. Possible exceptions are: Robert de Pykwell, captured by William Wallace in 1311, and ransomed by the Bishop of Durham.

Walter de Merton, Chancellor of England and Founder of Merton College Oxford who left 25 marks to Haltwhistle Church in his will in 1277, as being one of the places in which he had held preferment.

John Ridley, brother-in-law of the Protestant martyr Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of London, is buried at the church.

In sharp contrast, Humphrey Dacres, vicar from 1633-1670, who having been extruded from his living by the puritans during the Commonwealth was again discharged for being 'a notorious drunkard, being so drunk on the first Sunday this year that he could do no service in the Church, and there were other foul and scandalous informations brought against him by occasion whereof many of the parish were turned to popery'.

Thomas Rotherham, who was incumbent from 1768 to 1782, and had been a professor at Codrington College in the Barbados.

The poet Nathaniel Hollingsworth, vicar from 1809 to 1829.

The incumbency of Canon Lowe was remarkable not only for its length (44 years), but also for the opening of a Church School at Haltwhistle, and the building of the Church Hall there, together with the building of churches and church schools in outlying parts of the parish, making it possible to split the parish into three.





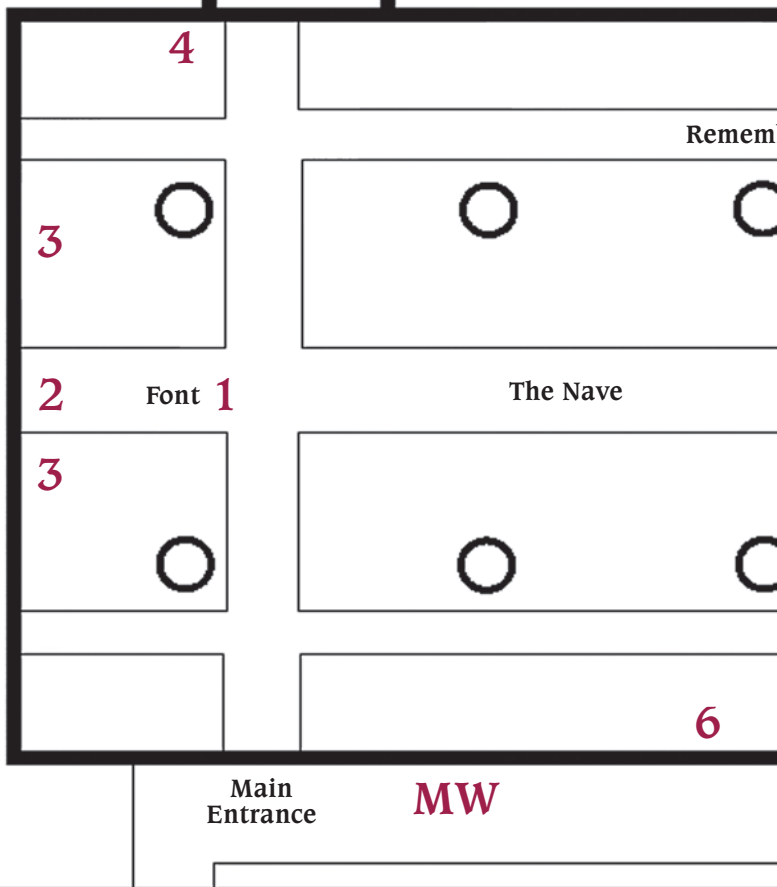
Holy Cross Anglican Church

Holy Cross

MW

Vestry
North Door

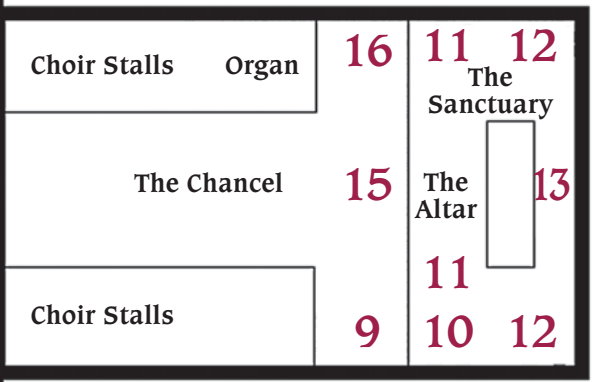
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- ### Key
- 1 Font
 - 2 West Window
 - 3 List of Vicars
 - 4 Water Stoup
 - 5 Memorial Stone
 - 6 Aumbry
 - 7 Piscina
 - 8 Rood Screen
 - 9 Ridley Memorial
 - 10 Sedilia
 - 11 Grave Covers
 - 12 Bishop's Chairs
 - 13 Reredos
 - 14 East Window
 - 15 Altar Kneelers
 - 16 Lowe Memorial
 - 17 Memorial Corner
- MW**
Memorial Windows

- 17**
Memorial Corner
- 5**
Pulpit
- 8**
Lectern
- 7**
The Lady Chapel



MW
MW

A Walk Around the Church



On entering the church through the south door the FONT (1) stands ahead and slightly to your left. The hexagonal bowl of the font belongs to the 17th century. The carving, although interesting, is of poor quality. On the first side there is a face surrounded by rays, followed on the second by an intricate knot, then a thistle, perhaps indicating the early date of our building linked with the Abbey of Arbroath, then a Maltese Cross, after that a fleur-de-lys with the letters IS (the first and last letters of the Greek word for

Jesus), and finally another complicated knot. Around the rim of the bowl there are holes showing that at some time the font had a fixed cover. Near the upper edge appear the letters RP July 29 1676: this probably refers to the vicar at that time, Robert Priestman. The interior of the bowl is in marked contrast to the exterior, being carefully and accurately worked, and shows signs of considerable wear and tear.

Before continuing to the back of the church, pause to take in the view down the NAVE, with its imposing rood screen, reredos and east window. Then crane your neck and look up at the magnificent ceiling of the nave. Looking in the other direction you can see the WEST WINDOW (2). Above the two panels is a round window depicting a pelican, held to be holy, because it sacrificed its own life by plucking out its feathers to allow its starving fledglings to feed on its blood.



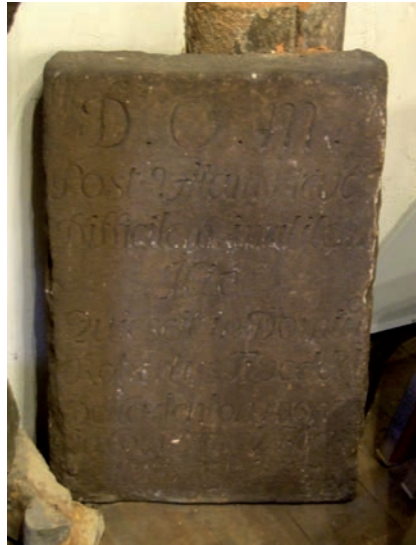
On either side of the window are two boards being the LIST OF VICARS (3), the first recorded being Radulphus de Bosco, 1254.



By the vestry door you will see the WATER STOUP (4) which is the oldest object in the Church, but it's origin is unknown.

Just to the left of the pulpit, on the floor, is a STONE MEMORIAL (5) which was brought out of the Churchyard in 1921. It bears a Latin inscription which translated reads:-

*To God the greatest and the best
After a short, difficult useless life
Here rests in the Lord
Robert Tweddle
Of Monk Hazelton Durham
Died 1735. Aged 23*



Return to the south door and walk down the SOUTH AISLE. The stained glass Coulson Memorial windows depict: (i) Mary Magdalene and Ruth and (ii) the martyrs Margaret and Stephen. During the restoration of 1870 marks were discovered that suggested that there had been an altar attached to the east end of the aisle.



On entering the Lady Chapel there is an Aumbry (6) in the South wall which contains the Reserved Sacrament.

In the Lady Chapel there is a PISCINA (7) which is often mistaken for a leper's squint. It is in fact a wash basin for sacred vessels. Two grave covers bearing the Thirlwell arms (three boars' heads) were also found there. The grave covers are now in the sanctuary.

Taking also into consideration the Thirlwell arms it would seem that the south aisle was once a Thirlwell Chantry. The window in memory of the wife, son, and eldest daughter of Canon Lowe, depicts St. Edwin and St. Aidan.



The ROOD SCREEN (8) was designed by Messrs Hicks and Charlewood of Newcastle, and carved by Ralph Hedley, also of Newcastle. It was dedicated in 1923 in memory of Canon J. Lowe who was vicar of the parish for 44 years. The inscription reads 'by thy Cross and Passion, by thy glorious Resurrection and Ascension good Lord deliver us'. The seven symbols of Christ's passion are over the head of the screen: the spear, Judas' money bag, the seamless coat, the crown of thorns, the cup of the Last Supper, the nails, and the scourge.

The craftsmen were justifiably proud of their work and were anxious it should not be spoilt by having notices pinned, nailed or stapled to it, so they put up a brass plate asking people not to do so. The plate is so small and so tucked away that most people do not see it! See if you can find it.



Passing under the rood screen you will see the first of the MEMORIAL WINDOWS on the south side which depict the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and the four great doctors of the church: Gregory, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine.

You will see the RIDLEY MEMORIAL STONE (9) standing upright against the south wall. It used to stand on two dwarf pillars in the middle of the chancel. It commemorates John Ridley, brother-in-law of the protestant martyr Nicholas Ridley; Bishop of London, who with Archbishop Cranmer and Bishop Latimer, was burnt at the stake in Oxford in 1555 by order of Mary Tudor. Freely rendered the inscription reads:

John Ridley, that sometime did be then Lord of the Walltown

*Gone is he out of this vale of misery:
His bones lie under this stone:
We must believe by God's mercy:
Into this world gave His Son:
Then for to redeem all Christians:
So Christ has his soul won:
All faithful people may be glad:
When death comes that none can flee:
The body which the soul kept in pain:
Through Christ is set at liberty
Among blessed company to remain:
To sleep in Christ now is he gone:
Yet still believes to have again:
Through Christ a joyful resurrection:
All friends may be glad to hear:
When his soul from pain did go:
Out of this world as doth appear:
In the year of our Lord
AD 1562*





In the south wall of the chancel there is a very beautiful three-stalled SEDILIA (10), stepped up from west to east to conform to the steps of the ancient floor. The arches are moulded in trefoil form and rise from clustered shafts which divide the stalls. The most senior clergy sat in the highest seat and the most junior the lowest.

GRAVE COVERS (11). On the north side of the sanctuary lies the stone effigy of a knight in mail, possibly that of Thomas de Blenkinsopp, who died in 1388. The legs have partly disappeared and the shield, which is very small, bears the three well-known Blenkinsopp garbs (corn sheaves). Against the south wall there is another Blenkinsopp grave cover, which, in addition to the arms, contains a very well-preserved and beautifully flowered and traceried cross, a sword, a staff and a script. These symbols might indicate that the knight had performed a pilgrimage, or that he had abandoned a military career for a religious one.

There are two other grave covers nearby which were found buried under the eastern arch of the south aisle and bear the Thirlwell Coat of Arms. Standing on either side of the sanctuary are two 17th-century black oak armchairs, known as the BISHOP'S CHAIRS (12). Two of the chairs have panelled backs with carved heads of smiling men.



The REREDOS (13), which is made of alabaster and stands behind the altar, depicts the nativity of Christ and is very fine indeed. The Infant is flanked by the Old Testament characters who heralded his coming – on the left the prophet Isaiah, and on the right King David.

There is hearsay that a curate thought the Reredos needed brightening up and without getting his vicar's permission or a faculty from the diocese painted the figures gold. The authorities descended upon him and he had to remove it, but some people maintain they can see flecks of gold on them today. It doesn't seem to have harmed the curate's career as he was eventually made a bishop!

The stained EAST WINDOW (14) was the gift of the Rev Dixon Dixon-Brown of Unthank Hall in memory of Dixon Dixon Esq. The beautiful triplet of lancets

with richly moulded trefoil inner arches and delicate shafts is 15th century work. The excellent glass is by William Morris & Co based on designs by Burne Jones, Philip Webb and Madox Brown. Burne Jones was a frequent visitor to



Naworth Castle and his work can be seen at St Martin's Church, Brampton and at Lanercost Priory. It is alleged that the east window was designed for a church in the South: how or why it came to Haltwhistle is a mystery. There is a framed illustration and description of the east window nearby.

In the upper part of the window the central figure is the crucified Christ. On the left is the Blessed Virgin Mary, and above her the cup of the Last Supper. On the right is Saint John, and above him the whip of Christ's scourging. The cross is unusual in that it is coloured green, signifying re-birth. In the lower part of the window there are three pictures, two of which are examples of what is called typological interpretation of the Old Testament: On the left, Isaac, the only son of his father Abraham, is seen as a type of Christ preparing for his own sacrificial death.

In the centre Moses is seen bidding the serpent-ridden people of Israel to gaze upon the brazen serpent in order to be healed. This represents men looking to the Crucified One to be saved from the death of sin in the wilderness of this world.

On the right is Christ carrying his cross up to Calvary.



Before leaving the sanctuary do look at the newly completed ALTAR RAIL KNEELER (15) which depicts the Icons of the Passion as shown on the Memorial Screen. The altar rail kneelers and over 100 pew kneelers around the Church are the work of members of the congregation.

A large tablet, the LOWE MEMORIAL (16), outlines the career of Canon Joseph Lowe and his achievements, and stands against the north wall outside the sanctuary.

Moving down to the NORTH AISLE you come to a corner of the Church dedicated to the memory of those who have gone before us with the sign of Faith. (17) There is a memorial book where their names may be entered and a candle be lit in their memory. The two windows facing east depict St Cuthbert and St Oswald and were erected as a memorial to Joseph Gordon.

The four windows facing south represent the New Testament figures Eunice, Salome, Mary and Elizabeth and were designed by Burne Jones. The entrance to the vestry was the original north door and main entrance.



The Smith family are highly respected in Haltwhistle and next to the vestry door is an interesting memorial to a lady named Smith who died in Serbia in the First World War and also a memorial to her brother.

Post Script

We hope that you have enjoyed visiting the Church of the Holy Cross Haltwhistle, and encourage you to thank God and to remember in prayer those men and women who over the years have laboured to preserve it. We wish you every joy as you continue your pilgrimage and may God's Blessing rest upon you.

*“We glory in your cross O Lord,
and praise you for your mighty
resurrection for by virtue of your cross,
joy has come into our world.”*

Sources

Hodgson: Northumberland

Arthur Mee: King's England Northumberland

Tony Storey: The Church at Hautwysel

Christopher Brook: Safe Sanctuaries

GWD Briggs: The Medieval Churches of Northumberland

English Heritage

It was in 1996 that I joined the congregation of Holy Cross, Haltwhistle, and volunteered to act as a guide in this beautiful and ancient Church. I was dismayed to find that I had no prompt sheet and set about preparing a guide, which I hoped would be helpful to visitors and volunteers. I would like to acknowledge the help given by Harris Walker, Betty Harden, Diana Robison and many others. I must also thank my daughter Ann Farwell for help with typing and in particular Lindsey Nicholls for her invaluable help in editing.

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Holy Cross Church





