

## Skipwith St Helen

### Virtual Tour/Top 10 Things to See

#### 1. The Tower



The tower of this church is a jigsaw puzzle for archaeologists, full of re-used Roman stone but dating largely to the later Anglo Saxon period.

Two carvings are worth looking for here. Make your way to the west end of the church and look up towards the clock, and you'll spot a curious selection of small windows set within the surviving Anglo-Saxon masonry. What were these for? Although some illuminate an early belfry, others may have been used to illuminate relics inside the church, with western light shining in through the window and making it shine to those inside the room located at first floor level here, which may have been a priest's room or small chapel.

#### **The women at the Sepulchre**

On the west side of the tower is another stone, harder to make out but thought by University of York experts to be a representation of the women at the Sepulchre on Easter morning. The stone is best seen late in the afternoon, as the sun moves around to the south and western side of the church.





## 2. The Bear stone



Now head back towards the main entrance of the church on the south. There's a creature hiding in the south-side of the bell tower. Can you spot him? Sitting amongst other Anglo-Saxon carvings embedded in the 960 AD tower, the 'bear stone' is thought to have once been a piece of ecclesiastical furniture - likely a throne from the 7th or 8th centuries - according to the [University of Durham's Archaeology experts](#)

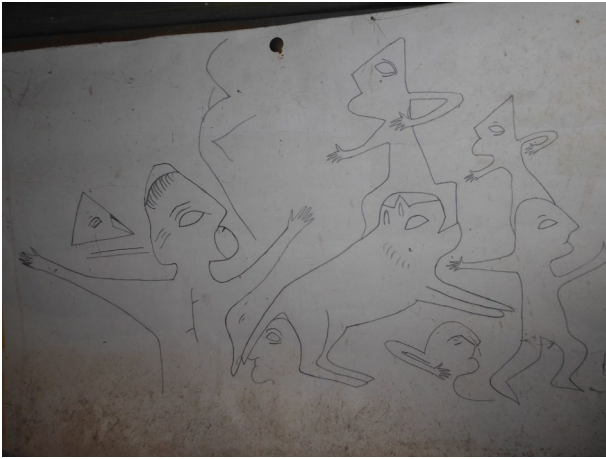
## 3. The South Door



One of the first things you'll notice as you enter St. Helen's Skipwith is its beautiful south door. Surrounded by Norman 'zig-zag moulding' the door's decorative ironwork dates to the early 13th century but was restored by the famous Victorian architect, John Loughborough Pearson in 1877.



#### 4. Viking engraving



There are further hidden treasures to discover inside the Tower. This Viking graffiti is Skipwith's most unique feature. It depicts a number of bearded figures, with shared outlines intertwining them with canine and sea serpent figures. It is thought to depict either Ragnarok, with the mythical wolf Fenrir taking centre-stage, attacking the Norse god Odin. With its puzzle-like composition, the graffiti may represent the earliest example of negative-space being used within artistic design in the British Isles. The formation of the markings show that it was likely carved with a knife and the geology of the stone suggests that it comes from somewhere near Tadcaster. Find out more from University of Durham experts [here](#).

#### 5. Altar area (repurposed stone, structural/screen changes)



Once you are inside the church, have a good look around you at the architecture of the nave, aisles and chancel. It's a story in stone, from the Anglo Saxon tower arch, to twelfth century arcades and thirteenth century chancel. You'll probably feel drawn to the natural light that seems to frame the altar from the windows above. Part of the glass here is medieval - you can see here the coat of arms of Anthony Beck (1284-1311), a powerful bishop of Durham, for example - though much of the original stained glass of the church has been lost.

The altar itself appears to be simple stone, but its upper surface preserves five 'consecration crosses' which show it to be a rare surviving medieval example. There was also a 'rood screen', which originally separated the chancel and the nave here. A small piece of this screen remains, framing the small Lady Chapel on the south side of the church.



## 6. 1615 tithe box



In the past, the church and its priest were maintained by a system of 'tithes', where the community was asked to give a tenth of what they produced to the vicar. Over time, these became cash payments and Skipwith is fortunate to have in its possession a 400-year-old tithe box, fixed to the column in the south aisle. Today, you can leave a donation in it to help maintain this wonderful building for future generations.

## 7. Pilgrim's Progress Windows

"As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den [jail], and I laid me down in that place to sleep; and as I slept I dreamed a dream." With these words, John Bunyan began his classic text, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The book was originally published in 1678. In the 1950s, St Helen's Skipwith installed a series of windows in the north aisle highlighting key moments in Christian's journey to the Celestial City. The narrative is a timeless reminder of the contemplative power of pilgrimage for all visitors, and the windows invite visitors of all ages and backgrounds to reflect on their own journeys through the wilderness of this world.

## 8. A churchyard wall made of gravestones



On first impression, Skipwith's graveyard wall might not look like much. However, look more closely, and you'll notice that some of the coping (top) stones seem to be strangely shaped for the job. And you'd be right. Likely built in the 18th Century, University of York researcher Dr Aleksandra McClain has revealed that the wall is partially composed of re-used medieval grave slabs. Although they are heavily eroded, the slabs probably date back to the 13th-15th Centuries.

## 9. The stone with the hole



This curious-looking stone on the east side of the church is the base for a long-gone standing cross. These intricately carved monuments once proudly stood in the crossroads and churchyards of medieval England and provided the focus for preaching, ritual processions and even as markers for marketplaces. Sadly, as is the case here, the original cross is long gone, a victim perhaps of the English Reformation. Perhaps it will turn up one day, re-set in a wall or stile?

## 10. Drainage gargoyle



Look up towards the roof as you walk round Skipwith and you'll spot a variety of curious carvings set high up on the walls. These slightly surprising figures served a double purpose. Their grimacing faces and gestures were designed to protect the church and ward off evil spirits, but they also protected the church in another way by providing a simple form of medieval drainage system as gargoyles, discharging water from the roof into the churchyard. Today, Skipwith relies on more modern systems of drainage which they are currently updating.